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Front cover shows glass "aggregate".



Innovation: managing the risks



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Continuous improvement and innovation is essential for most successful organisations. However, innovation is not without risk, and when you are responsible, like the Highways Agency, for the safe and economic operation of England's strategic road network, the consequences when things go wrong rarely escape public attention. Managing these risks is therefore vital, particularly if the Highways Agency is to take advantage of new technologies.

Most of the Agency's day to day business is governed by well-documented standards and specifications and supporting advice. Standards and consistency can bring numerous benefits but can be a barrier to innovation.

This need not be the case and in fact some of the most innovative solutions proposed by contractors have been fully compliant with standards. The real barriers to innovation are the often unequal sharing of costs, benefits, risks and rewards.

Inevitably innovation therefore requires close working partnerships and trust between clients like the Highways Agency and its suppliers.

One successful example of this concerns the asphalt materials used by the Highways Agency for the running surface of roads. In many ways what has happened here can be described as the "quiet revolution" with a move away from traditional surfacings towards a new generation of quieter options. In permitting this the Agency has responded to concerns from those living close to busy roads.

The innovation involved a heavy investment in research as well as working closely with industry to develop materials which could meet the traditional demands of safety, cost and best value while also providing the added environmental benefit of low

noise. This could only be achieved by developing new mixtures some of which included additives previously not used within asphalt.

Key questions which had to be addressed were how would they perform in the long term and how could the public procurer identify those products that would perform from those that might not. This required a move from traditional generic specifications towards performance and proprietary materials.

As a public procurer the Agency had clear responsibilities for obtaining best value. It was therefore necessary to ensure market competition. The outcome was a system of product approval now firmly established as HAPAS – the Highway Authorities Product Approval Scheme currently operated by BBA. The added benefit here was that by bringing together the various customer interests from Highways Agency, CSS and TAG with industry, challenging targets could be established for new products that would clearly meet all customer requirements and minimise risk while offering industry a return on its innovation.

We now have a market with about 25 products undergoing evaluation. The lessons learnt within the HAPAS scheme have highlighted the benefits of approvals for innovative products as a confidence builder for customers. It is likely to see application on an increasing range of products in the future.

But the risks of innovation have not gone away. The performance required of some materials is close to their limit given requirements for ever thinner layers and rapid maintenance processes often carried out in less than ideal weather conditions. When failures occur the client loses the use of the road and the supplier has to provide new material which the contractor has to relay. It is in the interest of all parties to minimise these risks as well as sharing the benefits.