

Colas

New packed products meet shift in market

Diversification and development of innovative products are forming the response to changing market conditions from Colas' packed products business in Warrington.

There has been a Colas bitumen emulsion plant in Warrington for nearly 80 years but in recent times a shift of emphasis has been placed on production. Many of the site's 100 or so tanks now contain a variety of specialist emulsions for delivery as packed products.

Colas has responded to market conditions with creativity and innovative ideas. As highway authorities seek more efficiency from use of their budgets, Colas has been

developing new products and more efficient ways of supplying them.

"Warrington supplies 90% of Colas UK's bulk and packed emulsion and the plant is our asset," says Sommerville Wright, Colas Business Manager for Products. "With significant reductions in the budgets of our biggest customer sector, the highways industry, we have had to look at opportunities to diversify and maximise the sustainability of our emulsions in the market."

Listening ever more closely to clients and anticipating their needs is the best strategy for coming up with new solutions. For instance, reduced public spend on highways

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has produced a knock-on reduction of UK asphalt sales of around 2.5Mt in three years, but has opened the way for developments in the market for more durable patching products.

Customers are also looking to maximise efficiency – of how they buy products and make use of their plant and human resources. In response, Colas now offers training in the use of all of its products and provides ongoing customer support. Resulting long term relationships give clients early opportunity to trial products as they are developed.

It is not just customer budgets that have undergone changes and called for some lateral thinking. "The market does not want to

More emphasis at Warrington is now placed on developing specialist products including Colas' bagged, and cold applied Colpatch road repair

have to deal with 15 or 20 suppliers any more and is looking to reduce its vendor lists for greater efficiency," says Wright. "So we are developing a package to meet that with a wider product range to give greater choice from Colas as a single supplier. Some of these items are manufactured by others, but the credibility and recognition of the Colas brand acts as a quality mark."

Hand in hand with these important market shifts come new health and safety and environmental requirements. The result is a tendency for highway authorities and their contractors to make more use of cold applied products for patching work. Colas' response has been the recent introduction of Colpatch.

"Shelf life and wastage are important considerations with materials and products for emergency patching. Previously the packed product might be good for six months, with bulk material having to be discarded after just a few weeks. The great advantage of

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Colas' bitumen emulsion plant in Warrington. "Our asset," says Colas Business Manager for products Sommerville Wright

Colpatch, which is available in 6mm grade, is that it has a potential storage life of two years," says Wright. "Furthermore, when you put it in a pot hole, it stays in the pot hole."

The city council at Aberdeen – where relatively severe winter put surfacing products under extreme tests – is one of a number of local authorities in Scotland to have put Colpatch through its paces.

"We were looking for alternatives to an earlier material that needed dry conditions for laying and lots of compacting," says Aberdeen's Roads Manager Mike Cheyne. "We took up the offer to trial Colpatch and had it for over a year, using it on pot holes in all kinds of weather.

"The long shelf life of Colpatch, its availability in 25kg bags or large bulk loads and the price all make it an attractive option.

Colpatch works well and we are certainly happy to continue using it," adds Cheyne.

Another feature that makes Colpatch so attractive is its durability. In Wright's view the market has been pushing hard for a cold macadam that can be stored in bulk and used as a first time permanent reinstatement. For now Colas is classifying Colpatch as a long lasting temporary repair, but plans to put it forward for BBA (British Board of Agrément) testing to get permanent repair status.

"This will answer the dual requirements of safety and cost effectiveness," says Wright. "The bulk storage option also gives local authorities and contractors more flexibility and cuts down on issues of packaging waste."

As part of the search for greater volume and visibility, Colas has been looking to raise the profile of its supply chain partnerships. A

number of processes – such as Velocity Pothole Filler and Rhino Asphalts' Readymac – use products manufactured to specifications developed with Colas. "We have sought to broadcast this information more widely and increase manufacturing availability for more partners," Wright says.

The highway sector remains Colas' largest market, but this far from precludes work in other areas. Developing products for the leisure, parks and playground sector has meant new solutions for familiar and established customers.

"Some spending has switched to landscaping and councils have more money now for leisure features," says Wright. "But they do not want drybound paths which are prone to erosion and deterioration."

After anticipating what they did want, Colas now produces a number of specifications for contractors that allow paths to be stabilised with bitumen emulsions combined with aesthetically pleasing coloured aggregates.

"Development of specialist products is now a key part of our business," says Wright. "The volume of road surfacing is just not there at present for bulk sales, but being flexible, smart and ready for change has kept us strong."



A wider product range is being developed to give clients greater choice from Colas as a single supplier