

Client Side

Positives to pull from new regimes

The role of local authority highway engineers is as important as ever and more so – despite the impression that might be drawn from Government’s local service KPIs.

Highway authority engineers may be feeling their role in communities is being overlooked. The reality, however, is that their work – in partnership with industry – has gone up in terms of importance, not down.

Downgrading of the relative status of highway operations is the impression given by the 198 key performance indicators Government has set local authorities to cover all services. Only three relate to roads – a measure of congestion and two relating to road maintenance – but highway condition impacts on many others (safety and access to services to name but two) and efforts to maintain it offer big gains.

Benefits in terms of greater efficiency and less energy use and emissions are readily available, through use of cold mix technology and recycling techniques for example; and by continuing the shift to more proactive maintenance and better use of resources offered by an asset management approach. Highway engineers can provide big savings, but more measurement and data is needed, despite the opposite impression.

“Government does not want to dictate, but instead leave it to local authorities to determine their priorities through Local Area Agreements,” says UK Roads Board Chairman Matthew Lugg. “The Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) regime has been watered down and local authority engineers are going to be measured more on how they work in their communities in terms of social and economic issues.

“However, Government is recognising the significant efficiency gains the road sector can deliver through asset valuation accounting and the shift to proactive maintenance. It is important that authorities continue developing comprehensive measurement and collation of



Local authority engineers can produce much benefit for their communities (see page 4)

road asset condition data; and that this is done consistently to maintain a national picture.”

This summer’s National Road Maintenance Condition Survey (NRMCS) from the Department for Transport (DfT) was “disappointing”, says Lugg, as the traditional approach was virtually abandoned, leaving nothing meaningful or comparable on a national basis. There is good news to report though. The Roads Board is working with DfT on a restoration of NRMCS as it was after industry lobbying and resulting Parliamentary questions. Plus – aside but related – DfT has announced a further £8M to add to the £15M already pledged for aiding compilation of asset inventory data. Authorities have until December to bid for a share.

“Reporting condition data is essential, nationally and locally. The NRMCS was the most accurate method available from a national perspective and although some BVPIs have gone from central Government requirements, local authorities still need these

measurements for their plans,” Lugg says. “SCANNER surveys are appropriate for collating the data consistently and the UK Roads Board is the obvious point for gathering it for the national picture.”

SCANNER is less cost effective for measuring authorities’ unclassified roads, but members of the Roads Board are continuing their work developing a ‘mini scanner’. And there are other issues for clients to address.

“Looking ahead, there is a lot of concern for local authorities over funding due to the current economic climate and fuel costs and they still have to find 3% year on year efficiencies,” Lugg says. “There will be difficulties, but the highway sector is well placed to produce these savings and we have got to work very closely with industry on energy costs, sustainable maintenance techniques and innovative products.”

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