

Shell Bitumen

Solutions Centre set to enhance customer experience

Shell Bitumen is about to unveil a new European 'Solutions Centre' for product development and materials testing, where customers can go to discuss their asphalt needs.

Highly skilled chemists and technicians are being lined up to work inside what promises to be one of the world's most impressive laboratories for bitumen and asphalt development. Shell Bitumen's new 'Solutions Centre' is being built near the city of Strasbourg on the French/German border and is set to open in spring 2011. The building will provide around 1,000m² of floor space and include open plan testing facilities and partitioned rooms housing the latest scientific equipment.

Staff working inside the building will not only create and modify blends of bitumen for Shell Bitumen, but will also work

alongside clients to develop specially tailored products. It is this coming together of Shell Bitumen's materials technicians and their customers under one roof which makes the creation of a Solutions Centre so exciting, says Shell Bitumen's Technical Manager for Europe Andy Self.

"From a customer relations point of view, it will be great to have somewhere central where we can meet and talk about product development," says Self. "Our clients will be welcome to come along to our laboratory and work with us to test asphalt mixtures and analyse the results."

He adds that many customers are perfectly happy for Shell Bitumen to carry

out testing behind closed doors. But some are sure to welcome the opportunity to see developments taking place and make comment or suggestions on the spot.

Shell Bitumen already runs Solutions Centres in China, Thailand and the Philippines and was keen to replicate their success in Europe. Strasbourg was chosen as the location for the new facility because it is right at the heart of Shell Bitumen's European customer base of France, Germany, the UK, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. The building is a 15 minute drive from Strasbourg and is close to the city's airport.

Opening of the new centre will represent

CLEAR BINDER LEADS TO COLOURFUL RESULTS

One of the latest bitumen products to be launched by Shell Bitumen is Shell Floraphalte, a clear binder formulated to provide environmental benefits without compromising on performance, which is used to manufacture coloured asphalt. It is likely that Shell Floraphalte will be one of the many products to be further developed and tested at Shell Bitumen's new European Solutions Centre from next year.

Shell Floraphalte was brought to market in 2008 and is suitable for use on cycleways, footpaths and large pedestrian areas. Use of a clear binder allows a coloured pigment to be added to the mix to produce asphalt with a vivid appearance. Shell Floraphalte is designed to retain its colour over many years. According to Shell Bitumen the material can

produce a better quality finish compared to the application of conventional coloured paint on a surfacing.

Shell Floraphalte contains a high proportion of plant based feedstocks. A recent study has shown that the amount of CO₂ absorbed from the atmosphere during the feedstock's growth could be enough to offset the carbon emissions associated with the manufacturing, transportation and construction of a 30mm asphalt pavement using Shell Floraphalte*. Trials of the new product are under way in the UK and the material has already been specified on a handful of contracts in France. "This is one of a series of products that Shell Bitumen has developed to meet customers' various needs," says Shell Bitumen's Technical Manager for Europe Andy Self.



Shell Floraphalte: the clear binder mixed with pigment produces long lasting colour

* Source: INTRON Floraphalte LCA report 'A review of Floraphalte® with a focus on CO₂ and energy compared to 70/100 paving grade bitumen and its application after critical review', 2009
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Shell Bitumen's European Solutions Centre is being built near Strasbourg and will feature the latest in materials development technology

a change in the way Shell Bitumen does business with its customers in Europe. It previously relied on a mixture of internal and external suppliers of technical services to carry out product development and testing, in a variety of laboratories in countries across the continent. It also operated a laboratory near Rouen in northern France, which recently closed. Bringing all this work in house and to one location should help Shell Bitumen's drive to innovate with new solutions and bring products to market.

Andy Self adds that Shell Bitumen used to see itself as a locally based business, but is becoming more global in its outlook. Each of the four Solutions Centres will maintain close contact with one another to see how latest developments or advances made in one region could be of benefit to others. Shell Bitumen's European Solutions Centre will also give its newer members of its staff vital hands on experience of working in a laboratory.

As the name suggests, the new Solutions Centre will aim to provide answers to challenging briefs. This may include how best to develop a hardwearing asphalt suitable for application inside a road tunnel, or the creation of a surfacing that helps to reduce carbon emissions.

Often the answer is to use a higher

grade binder but, as Self points out: "It is difficult to convince clients of the merits of using premium materials in these economically tough times. The new Solutions Centre will help us to explore all the options with clients and demonstrate to them first hand the advantages of using new products."

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Examples of recent material developments that Shell Bitumen will be testing and discussing with clients include the reduced temperature asphalt Shell WAM® Foam, the low odour additive Shell Bitufresh and the clear binder Shell Floraphalte (see box).

Staff at the Solutions Centre will also be developing further uses for Shell Bitumen's Cariphalte range of polymer modified binders, while exploring how the material could be better promoted in some countries. German clients, for instance, seem more willing to use enhanced materials in the lower layers of a road as

well as surface courses, but according to Self, UK customers tend to specify premium binders only for use in surface courses. Samples of materials laid on trial sites will also be tested at the Solutions Centre to see how well they have performed over time.

"This project demonstrates our commitment to the bitumen industry in Europe," Self adds. "It shows we are focusing on innovation, new product development and our customers. The Solutions Centre will be a key part of our business for many years to come."



Customers will be able to witness Shell Bitumen's laboratory work first hand

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