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Working together for a better roads network

The challenges facing those who manage our highways infrastructure are already immense and continue to grow. So how can collaboration make a difference? Nick Smee is confident it can, and explains why

The challenges are legion: funding is in general decline; investment in repairs and maintenance looks unlikely to increase for the foreseeable future, and a sizeable proportion of the public feel their local road network is in decline. And all against a backdrop of increasing vehicle numbers and road usage.

To counter these trends, we are seeing the introduction of new technologies such as strategic asset management, an increasing willingness to embrace innovation, and a growing use of predictive analytics. These are positive developments. However, maximising their value could involve a step-change in thinking for those managing our highways.

Making more sense

Instead of going it alone, it would make more sense for them to work collaboratively. They need to start tapping into the expertise and enhanced operational efficiencies that working closely with the supply chain, technology solutions providers and academic research departments can bring. This might be to share new concepts and technologies, or to develop formal working partnerships.

While better communication with road users is vital, collaboration and engagement with the wider supply chain and third party technology providers could be just as important in achieving this critical end goal.

Unfortunately, the way that government funding is allocated frequently works against this. The 100% retention of business rates by local authorities means that many councils will be operating in their own devolved areas raising their own money and using it how they see fit.

Broader engagement

At the same time, collaboration is still in its earliest stages across the sector. Providers working with consultants, clients with contractors, contractors working together – these relationships remain patchy and inconsistent. There is a need for broader engagement between councils and the wider supply chain – with asset management technology providers and indeed with academia in the form of university research departments.



The Government's five-year programme of work to deliver the £15bn Road Investment Strategy will call for ever-closer collaboration between all those involved

The collaborative approach needs to start at the project planning phase. Typically, there is a tendency to first select the team and then decide on the project objectives. But, doing this in reverse is more logical and encourages better collaboration. So starting with the end objective and then selecting the cross-organisational team best placed to achieve the required outcome could be a more sensible move.

Untapped talent

Often, today's asset management projects fail to tap into a broader ecosystem of expertise that draws on talent pools outside the main team. Much can be gained by making use of the expertise and understanding being developed in university research departments; or by working with other authorities to share technology and ideas, or even by closely engaging with government to gain a better understanding of how to tap into new funding sources.

Of course, this all needs a catalyst to make it happen – and this must involve increasing investment in training, finance and skills. But in turn these can be shared out across a selection of councils, all helping to build up best practice across the network.