

# A change of focus

Despite being only a matter of months since the launch of the £15 billion government 'Road Investment Strategy' the impact has been significant. Steve Isaacs, who manages the highways team at Stirling Lloyd, has been working in the industry for over 30 years. Here he shares his thoughts on how the recent changes are being received



**"Clients chasing the lowest cost – even if the solution only lasts six months – are in decline"**

Steve Isaacs

To borrow a line from Bob Dylan – 'Times They Are A-Changin' – and this certainly rings true in the highways industry. Recent additional funding for infrastructure and key investment in highways is already starting to make a real difference. Admittedly, it's a welcome and refreshing change and it's a great time to be a highway engineer – working to deliver high quality maintenance solutions in an environment where the emphasis isn't just on cost cutting.

Although local government is still in the grips of the 'austerity beast' there's a significant shift in attitude and determination to 'fight their way out'. Focus has changed and the priority is to protect and improve the value of an asset – to look at the whole life benefit. As for central government and Highways England, they seem to be 'Keeping Calm and Carrying On' – delivering real foresight across the industry, with five-year plans being rolled out and budgets agreed at the outset.

At the recent Westminster Transport Forum, the implications of the additional funding were discussed; we were now being rightly challenged to step up to the mark, make a difference and add value. Putting this into context – at the coalface, or rather on the road – I'd like to focus on one asset type – the white line.

## Reassessing road markings

We recently asked our technical team to reassess the quality of Stirling Lloyd white line road markings that had been down for seven years. Why seven years? It was about this time that there was a definite push to add value, coupled with a concern for environmental impact in the industry. Fast forward seven years and the issues remain the same. The difference today is that we understand clearly what 'value' and whole life cost actually means – thanks to the establishment of the asset manager. There are various



*The retroreflectivity of road markings in Leeds remains high after seven years*

ways that clients and contractors set out to achieve compliance or not, as they feel appropriate. Many of the lining companies apply their road marking solution on Highways England sections, returning to refresh these at six monthly intervals, replacing them at 12 monthly intervals. Whereas in local government areas, the lines are usually replaced on a 'needs doing basis' – sometimes every six months – sometimes after years, when the original lines cannot be seen anymore.

There is a third way. Leeds inner relief road (2008) – a busy section where the engineer wanted to avoid closing the road for any maintenance or road marking repainting; a local highway engineer was persuaded to look at Safetrack LM Retromax from Stirling Lloyd. Relatively new to the market, the product had proven results following two year HA trials on the A14 in Cambridgeshire.

The lines were installed in August 2008 and, like all good trials on highways, they were forgotten about. However, the site demonstrates clearly the effectiveness of the product and the results are significant. The retro reflectivity after seven years is still 150 Mcd – 50 per cent higher than the specification typically required after

one year – an exceptional result for innovation and whole life management. Long-term approaches such as those taken in Leeds are very much the way forward. It makes sense as traffic volumes increase and unprecedented demand is put on our highways.

## Whole life cost

As we start to do the maths, it's clear that up front costs shouldn't be the deciding factor for maintenance procurement. The whole life cost should be the consideration and we must take into account road worker safety, congestion and environmental impact.

Thankfully clients chasing the lowest cost – even if the solution only lasts six months – are in decline. Forward thinking clients are looking for fresh ideas and are demanding innovative solutions. Having worked in highway maintenance for over 30 years I know what it's like to manage decline in the industry – that approach was unfortunately standard for some 25 years. With significant investment now available and a strategic approach to managing the highways network in place it certainly is a great time to be a highway maintenance engineer – a refreshing change and very welcome. ➔