Disruptors pose “real threat” to innovation aims of highway firms

Infrastructure firms risk being overtaken in their ambitions to introduce new technologies to major road contracts by ‘disruptive’ companies from outside the sector, a highways roundtable heard in early November.

Construction consultancy firm Mace’s in-house lawyer Anna Smyth told the event: “There is a clash of cultures between technology firms and those of us working in infrastructure. Technology companies may not have the patience to work with us, end up doing things themselves, supply our clients with new systems and leave us out. That is a real threat we need to address.”

Kier Highways’ collaboration and improvement director Martin Duffy added: “Technology firms are giving us a chance to participate and influence the future; so we either go on that journey and help it along, or we wait and have something done to us.”

Several participants to the event, organised by the commercial law firm Beale & Company, also expressed concerns that suppliers within the roads sector with bright ideas may be reluctant to put forward their innovations for fear they will lose a competitive advantage.

Kier’s technology director Paul Wilson remarked: “Many of the best ideas come from the supply chain, but why would they provide them for free?” He said it can be hard for suppliers to capitalise on research and development associated with new plant and ways of working. And he added that disruptive companies who “bring their knowledge and intelligence” from other sectors would certainly not be prepared to “give it all away”.

Beale partner Will Buckby said he is noticing an upturn in highways contracts where technology plays a major part and is offering more legal advice in this area now than in previous years. More generally, he added that collaborative highway contracts often encourage good behaviours and reduce the number of disputes. But he warned that these benefits are not always passed down the supply chain.

The roundtable also discussed whether Highways England’s Road Investment Strategy to 2020 is realistic and what the sector might expect from the second RIS. The question was asked if Transport Secretary Chris Grayling’s recent announcement of a ‘reprofiling’ of the strategy showed that the plan had over promised and so far under delivered.

Mott MacDonald’s managing director for highways David Tarrant FCIHT said that the strategy represents “a fantastic change in terms of the level of investment coming in” and has been “hugely positive” for the sector.

But he added that a number of schemes in the plan have been around for a long time because they have been difficult to deliver, both in terms of technical solutions required and getting stakeholders to agree on the way forward.

Arup’s global highways business leader Tony Marshall FCIHT added that the move to a five year investment period combined with the formation of Highways England were important steps to take, but very large ones nonetheless.

“Getting it spot on in terms of what could be delivered in those first five years was probably quite challenging, because the changes that took place were huge,” he said.

Highways Agency’s former network delivery and development director Derek Turner FCIHT said he hopes that the focus going forward is on “soundly establishing” a second Road Investment Strategy, because “the process of establishing such strategies is long and complex”.

He added that issues can be compounded by “politicians who wish for a fast delivery” and who may not be tolerant of schemes whose estimates go over initial budgets.

Derek Turner also remarked that more money needs to be spent on the long term asset management of major roads; a point echoed by several other participants.

Several disruptive technologies making their way into the transportation sector are featured in this issue’s Innovation special.

FCIHT also suggested allowing cycling outside of peak retail hours in what she called a ‘flexible streets’ approach.

“The use of LEDs to mark out routes, the street could ‘evolve’ and operate in different ways at different times of the day,” she said.

“There is an opportunity to turn Oxford Street from somewhere that is currently quite an unpleasant place to be into a showcase for a flexible street and an exemplar of a healthy, well-designed, shared space,” she said.

Meanwhile a group of campaigners have joined forces in a call to make Oxford Street – through careful design – the ‘most accessible street in the UK’.

Living Streets, Age UK London, the Campaign for Better Transport, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Sustrans and Transport for All penned a joint letter to the Mayor in which they noted that current conditions make the street a no-go area for many disabled and older people.

“The transformation of Oxford Street is a once in a generation opportunity to make one of the UK’s most iconic streets and surrounding district open to everyone,” they argued. SD