Taming the 'pet hate'

Can sustainability improve the public perception of street and highway works? **Arun Marsh** takes a look.

Street and highway works are a public 'pet hate'. Sometimes, road lanes and footways can be blocked off for months, with those caught up in the congestion and delays having no idea why.

But these works are also essential to the public's modern way of life, for the maintenance of roads, to keep homes lit, warm and watered, as well as entertained and connected to the Internet. So, what can be done to better improve street works in the public eye?

Why not improve this industry's sustainability? Sustainable street works might sound like a luxury when pressures often dictate a job is completed and lanes reopened as soon as possible, but, by following some simple guidelines, it can done without additional time – and can also save money.

Thinking sustainably can see the reuse or recycling of materials encouraged on-site. This can save money and, if environmentally sound, can maintain a good profile in the public eye.

The more sustainable a company, the higher regard it is held in by the public. Admittedly, this might not appease the motorist waiting at temporary traffic lights, but it could at least generate more positive headlines in newspapers.

Prevention is better than cure and nowhere could this be more true than with pollution

Local newspapers are quick to note when a pond or river changes colour or becomes contaminated with oil and, if there are any street or highway works nearby, mention will at least be made – even if there is no direct link.

Pollution prevention will keep down the costs of a clean-up. Around 15% of incidents reported to the Environment Agency are connected with oil. On average, the cost of cleaning up oil pollution is £30,000, and all costs incurred by the EA for cleaning up any kind of incident are passed on to the person or organisation responsible.

Reducing all possibility of street works causing pollution is, therefore, a financial as well as an environmental saving.

Prevention is better than cure, and nowhere could this be more true than with pollution. Because of this, the EA has drawn up pollution-prevention guidelines to help businesses stay 'green'.

Speaking at the recent Utility Street Works conference, Steve Wenham, technical adviser on pollution prevention at the EA, outlined some agreed key areas in construction where environmental improvements could be made. These included:

- Proactive environmental site management, encompassing resource efficiency, waste, energy consumption, pollution during construction, transport used, ecology in the area and working near water;
- Introducing a company-wide environmental risk-management system;
- Sustainable design and construction, and working with sub-contractors to ensure works are as sustainable as possible.

By following these guidelines – which are explained in detail on the Environment Agency's website – organisations digging the roads can reduce the risks of fines or imprisonment, and can reap the benefits mentioned above.

Often, it is people on the ground – those who also bear the brunt of the motorist's distain and are under the most pressure to finish a job – that can be unaware they are doing something wrong.

A key element of pollution prevention is to make sure all staff are trained in how to avoid incidents, what to do if one occurs, and how to report it, so the situation can be rectified as soon as possible.

Also speaking at the Utility

Mark Wolfender

Avoiding the pitfalls: By thinking sustainably, street workers can help maintain a good profile in the public's eyes

Street Works conference, sustainability director of the National Joint Utilities Group (NJUG), Grant Rogers, said its *Vision for street works* was already pushing for sustainability. The document calls for 'utilities to maximise the use of sustainable methods and materials', and Rogers has been given the role of ensuring this happens.

He defined sustainability within street works as 'working in a way that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

Rogers also pointed out that: 'The term is usually associated with minimising the impact on the environment and ecology, but is equally applicable to economics, business and people – retention of skills and knowledge being key.'

With the help of a sustainability working group, NJUG has established four essential aspects to being more 'environmentally friendly'.

First in this list is materials, looking at recycling and reuse where possible – not just for aggregates – and how the materials which are used are produced.

The second aspect is the plant, examining fleet management options, alternative fuels and clean running engines.

Third is consideration of the techniques used, promoting minimum dig, reducing the emissions from disturbing and exposing ground, and using reheated bitumen.

The final aspect is the operations. These cover transporting people and equipment to site, work planning and site practices.

Rogers explains that by 'doing the right thing' – and being seen to do the right thing – the public estimation of those carrying out street works will rise.

Once good practices are in place, it is important to monitor how they are performing and some standardised key performance indicators and targets will help with this.

Rogers suggests these KPIs should include: Percentage of excavated spoil sent to landfill; percentage of virgin material used in reinstatement; Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) carbon footprint measure; fuel use or mileage of commercial fleet; and percentage of defective reinstatements.

By following these measures, and creating a culture where protecting the environment is a core value of street works, it is hoped that organisations will gain better credibility. Then, perhaps, the man digging in the street can avoid being subjected to abuse from the man in the street.