

Super show

Bardon Aggregates with its reputation for innovation now has a high profile showcase for company products and techniques: Super Agency Area 7.

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Innovation and the promise of cost effective solutions figured prominently in BLN Routecare's bid for Super Agency Area 7, the maintenance contract for trunk roads in Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. That was 18 months ago, since when one of the successful joint venture's partners – Bardon Surfacing – has pushed hard to get its leading edge products used.

"Our involvement in BLN brings mutual advantage to all parties," says Bardon Surfacing central region general manager Mike Archer. "Our client the Highways Agency gets value for money and our JV partners the comfort of a high quality contribution from ourselves. We get the benefit of demonstrating our materials and services."

Bardon Surfacing is the contracting arm of materials specialist Bardon Aggregates, and also the B of BLN Routecare. The L and N are the direct labour organisations respectively of Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire county councils.

BLN came together in an alliance driven by good sense. In particular, the county councils wanted to protect their DLOs when trunk road maintenance was privatised while Leicestershire based Bardon was concerned about defending its home market. It was some little way into the bid process that the contractor realised that there was an additional benefit to winning the job.



Bardon Surfacing is the BLN JV partner which carries out Area 7 surfacing.

"BLN's bid team had to put together a quality submission demonstrating on paper how we would run the operation, everything from winter maintenance to looking after bridges, maintaining lighting and clearing up after accidents," says Bardon commercial manager Brian Downes.

"We had to price a works schedule with over 3000 items. Also among the paperwork was a section on innovation which was really an encouragement to look for more cost effective solutions. This suited us"

Innovation reputation

Bardon has a considerable reputation for innovation. For instance, it has developed a formidable range of thin and high durability wearing course systems; carried out pioneering work with cold mix/cold lay and cold mix recycled materials; and produced a startling array of coloured macadams. The company likes to innovate and open up new market niches.

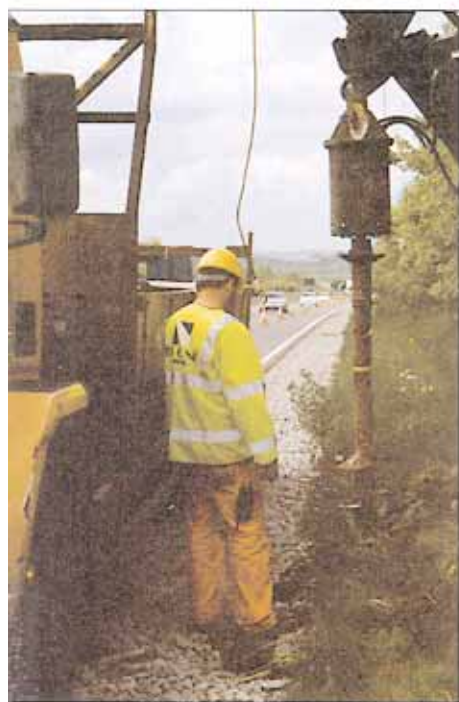
"The contract, lasting three years with a further year renewable, was bid effectively to a two

envelope system. Eighty percent of the marks were financial, 20% were for quality," Downes says.

Bardon's submission on innovation earned the JV valuable points and the contract was won in February 1998. Mobilisation took six weeks and BLN began operations on 1 April, under the instruction of Highways Agency agent PLaN. PLaN is an amalgam of consultant Parkman and the design offices of Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire county councils.

"Being part of a Super Agency JV gives us, Bardon, the opportunity to discuss alternative materials and methods of working up front," says Mike Archer. "Being part of the team, what we have to suggest is more readily listened to and, as the confidence of the others has grown, more readily accepted."

The other parties have come to believe that when Bardon proposes Hitex, for instance, the company's clause 942 compliant thin wearing course, in place of hot rolled asphalt, that this is in the best interests of everyone. Trust comes into the equation, but so too does the appreciation that



Agency maintenance work is varied.

Bardon will not let hiccups occur or go looking for claims. "We can't afford to," Archer says. "Our reputation is on the line and we make sure our materials work."

Tight constraints

Area 7 embraces 350kms of trunk roads in the two counties plus little bits of Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire. Several hundred structures come into the Super Agency, among them road, rail and river bridges.

The way the Super Agency works is as follows. Highways inspectors from PLaN identify what work needs to be carried out and issue works tickets which specify what needs to be done and when it needs to be done by. The categories are emergency, ie right now; one to seven days; eight to 28 days; and 28 days to six months.

The constraints are tight. Monitoring of performance is carried out by the Highways Agency which expects BLN to achieve 97% of its works tickets on time, per quarter. This caused some consternation at the start, says Archer, because the ticket for

works supposed to be done within seven days would arrive late, on day three, for instance.

Now there is an electronic database which processes everything much more rapidly, and to which all parties – including the Highways Agency – have access. "The partnership ethos originally put in place by the JV partners now extends to the Agency and to PLaN," Archer says. "We've all become very enthusiastic about it."

Once a works ticket is issued, responsibility for executing the works goes to the most appropriate JV partner, or grouping of partners. For example, for a road surfacing job in Nottingham, Bardon might carry out the surfacing, Leicestershire the traffic management because it has particular expertise in this area, and Nottinghamshire the white lining.

"At Bardon, we have a core team devoted to BLN Super Agency work but draw in other human and mechanical resources as and when they are available, and needed."

The works tickets cover term maintenance activity up to £100,000 in value. Works of a higher value are put out to tender. In Super Agency 7's first 12 months, around 3500 works tickets were issued worth around £7M, while contracts tendered totalled about twice that figure.

Nothing prevents BLN bidding for the tendered work and the JV is winning its share, according to Brian Downes. Early this year, for instance, it took a £2.6M contract to improve a section of the A52 Gamston to Saxondale road and completed the job ahead of time. "We got a formal pat on the back from the Highways Agency for this," he says.

Archer says that the JV partners have learned a good deal in their first year of running the Super Agency and will use their improved knowledge, particularly of planning, to increase their efficiency during this and subsequent years.

"The experience Bardon has gained through being part of BLN we are also putting to good use in winning work as a preferred subcontractor/supplier in other areas," he says. The company is working for Prismo Doyle and Amey in Super Agencies around the country. "At the moment you can travel from Land's End to Oxford on Bardon surfacings."

So, all in all, Bardon's involvement with Super Agency 7 has been a good thing. It has gained a showcase for its products, has sold a good number of kerbs, flags, stone, filter media, concrete and recycled materials into the contract as well as asphalt, and is now winning related work elsewhere. "Bit of a win-win situation," Archer observes.

The vast majority of surfacing during Area 7's first year has involved Hitex, Bardon's top selling thin wearing course.

