

# Understanding the network



Joint venture Balfour Beatty Mott MacDonald (BBMM) operates and maintains Area 4 on behalf of the Highways Agency. Area 4 connects the vital transport nodes of Gatwick Airport, HS1, Channel Ports and Eurotunnel, and represents its own unique set of challenges. Ian Spellacey, highways services director for Balfour Beatty and Christine Allen, contract director for Area 4, spoke to *Highways Magazine* editor Alec Peachey

Comprising approximately 950 carriageway kilometres across Kent, East and West Sussex and Surrey, Area 4 includes two tunnels, 28 signalised junctions, several thousand street lights and 850 structures ranging in size from small culverts to the twin Medway Bridges on the M2.

Managing and maintaining this road network requires collaboration and a sustained approach to ensure all stakeholders are on the same path towards improvement. As part of its drive to improve efficiency, BBMM carries out regular inspections of the network. *“When a particular part of the network has deteriorated to a point where it needs renewal we plan a big programme of works, normally around 200 schemes a year, where we go out and renew those particular areas of the network,”* explains Christine Allen, contract director for Area 4. *“Part of what sits behind that, which people probably wouldn’t know, is the vast number of inspections that we do. This means going out on a daily basis and checking the condition of the network, making sure we understand the condition that it’s in. We then work with the Highways Agency to prioritise work. It’s about working with the HA,*



The A27 Chichester roundabout

*understanding what the network needs are and developing a programme of future works. It’s something that happens very much in the background, but it is vital to have good knowledge of what needs to be done.”*

Highways services director Ian Spellacey agrees: *“I think people look at the highway maintenance industry as an industry that is carrying out reactive work, but actually that model has morphed over the course of the last few years. The scheme delivery and asset management side of what we do is far more in focus now. I would suggest that probably 70 if not 80*

*per cent of what we do now is around managing the asset, developing schemes and improving the asset as opposed to reactive work. If you look back 10 years the balance would probably have been the other way.*

*“I’ve had experience within the local authority market as well and what attracted me to the HA market is that longer term view and approach to managing the network over a longer period, rather than reactively filling in potholes and carrying out patch repairs. From a network perspective and the road users’ perspective it is absolutely the right thing to do.”*

Working in a joint venture can present its own unique set of challenges, but both Allen and Spellacey point out that there is real synergy between Balfour Beatty and Mott MacDonald.

*“One of the unique things about Area 4 is the people who actually work here see themselves as being focused on Area 4. There are no badges on people, either physical or psychological ones, around I work for Balfour Beatty or Mott MacDonald,”* continues Allen. *“They work for BBMM and they work for Area 4. People are very proud and committed to the network. Most of the people that work here live in Area 4 and see it as their patch and want to do the best job for the local area.”*

Spellacey notes: *“From a business perspective it is all around action and open and honest dialogue when you enter into a joint venture, so that you*



Work taking place on the Medway Viaduct



The Medway Viaduct

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← really understand what each party brings to it. We've got complementary teams so what BB can't bring to the party, MM do and vice versa. With people entering a more local arrangement knowing their roles and responsibilities and the part they play, it sort of breaks down all those boundaries and the one team approach."

### The contract

BBMM's current contract was due to expire on 30 September 2014, but it has been extended until the end of June next year. Allen hopes the good work that BBMM has done in the

past will help it to win a further and longer-term renewal.

"The knowledge that our team have built up of the network is second to none," she remarked.

"When we were awarded the current contract, no service provider had been awarded the same commission twice, so we're building on that and hoping to be the first to make it three."

Because of its close proximity to a number of vital transport nodes, it is estimated that 75 per cent of the HGVs that come into the UK do so through Area 4.

"Area 4 is quite a unique part of the network. Seventy two per cent of our network is trunk roads, rather than motorways. This in itself makes it quite a challenging network to manage," states Allen. "Dover Port is absolutely vital and with the ports we've got we estimate that 75 per cent of the HGVs that come into the UK do so through Area 4. The network gets a hammering from HGV usage because we're the routes into and out of Europe."

BBMM regularly meets with stakeholders including Eurotunnel, Dover Port and Gatwick Airport to discuss what is happening on the network.

"The other interesting challenge that the network gives us in Area 4 is the drivers that we have on it. There are large numbers of foreign drivers and large numbers of people driving onto new networks. We get a whole host of driver behaviour issues that we have to tackle in a different way in Area 4 than we would do elsewhere," Spellacey tells *Highways Magazine*. "There's a different driver mentality there where people are rushing to get flights, etc. That awareness across our teams needs to be there so that we are planning our works around some of the peak times for the ports and the airport."

As part of its drive to improve efficiency, while also securing the key HA objectives of Safe Roads, Reliable Journeys and Informed Travellers and BBMM's five Fit for the Future measures: Be Safe, Satisfied Customers, Performance Management Framework (PMF), Be Profitable and Be Sustainable, a need to create a cultural shift through building high quality relationships has been identified.

Spellacey explains: "It's almost like a matrix style organisation where we have discipline leads and asset champions so that they understand the intricacies of their own asset types. We have these specialists, but that is kind of overlaid with our regional approach to the depots and compounds. The secret is in pulling those together so that you're getting the intelligence from the inspections and those champions into each local area."

### Investment in roads

Earlier this year Roads Minister Robert Goodwill called on the industry to be ready for a large increase in work ahead of the government's biggest investment in the road network since the 1970s. Both Allen and Spellacey believe that a move away from annualised funding is key.

"By doing so ourselves and the HA have got better buying power and everyone knows that they've got security of investment. This means that you can choose to invest more and ensure that you can deliver more efficiently. That security of future workload and →

“investment in the network will have a massive impact in terms of how efficient we can be,” says Allen.

Spellacey adds: “The unit rate bashing that has gone on in previous years will only get you small percentage points of efficiency. The real efficiency comes from people being able to see a long-term programme.”

Funding and reform will be underpinned by legislation so future governments cannot walk away from the commitments.

Spellacey commented: “If there’s one thing the industry has been clamouring for it’s that certainty of commitment so that we’re not constantly changing our approach to managing the asset every time the government changes. A long-term commitment is absolutely the right way forward. Without becoming political about it, quite often we’ve seen road funding reduced for schools and hospitals, but we kind of forget that the road network is for a vast majority of people the only way of transporting goods and people around the network.

“I think investment in the road network actually underpins some of the other aspects that any government would want to commit to in terms of schools, hospitals and the healthcare system. It really opens out an opportunity for the Agency to take a very strategic view of the network rather than simply maintaining the asset that it has got.”

The former Carillion contracts director argues that we’re now entering one of the most important periods in the industry’s history.

“This is an absolutely critical time and the industry has got to step up. We’ve got to make sure that we have the right people and the right management structures in place. Throughout this we’ve got to make sure that we keep innovating. Again, it would be very easy to just keep delivering the day job, but actually we’ve got to still look for smarter ways of working.

“What it does do is it gives us an opportunity to look very differently at the way in which we operate. Given that this is a 10 year plan it gives us the chance to start looking at encouraging people into the industry and looking at it as a long-term career prospect.”

## Is the industry ready for this investment?

“I think there’s a lot of work underway and a lot of plans are developed. I would argue that there will be varying levels of execution. I think that there is a ramping up in hand, but we’re dealing with what we’ve got in front of us at the moment and need a bit more time to develop the more sustainable plan for the next 10 years,” comments Spellacey.

The A2 Roundhill Tunnel, near Folkestone



Allen believes the guaranteed funding represents a good opportunity for Balfour Beatty Mott MacDonald to work more closely with its supply chain.

“For our supply chain they’re really waiting to see the money on the table so we recently held a supply chain conference where we brought 100 people from our supply chain together with the Agency to speak with them directly about what they were looking for.

“I think one of the advantages we’ve got from a BB perspective is because (Connect Plus Services) also work on the M25 where we’ve got a 30 year DBFO contract, we already have a longer term view on how to operate and maintain a very strategic part of the HA’s network. This means that we’re able to support the HA very effectively around the longer term kinds of planning that they’re moving to across the rest of the network. I think that’s quite a unique aspect of what we’re able to do and it helps us in Area 4 because when it comes to being innovative and engaging with the supply chain they know that we’ve already got a longer term view and we’re trying to build on it to the benefit of the other parts of the network that we operate.”

## Industry attractiveness

Both Spellacey and Allen think that more needs to be done to make the industry more attractive.

Spellacey: “In terms of industry attractiveness, I think there’s still a job to do around that. We have a role within the industry to raise awareness and get out into schools, colleges, universities, and really start to open people’s minds to what is actually quite a fast moving and exciting industry.”

Allen: “I really enjoy getting up and going to work in the morning knowing that we have to keep the road network running for the public for them to be able to get out and do what they need

to do. There’s no question in my mind as to why I come to work everyday, but I don’t think we promote what a rewarding career it is.

“Of course we need to attract younger professionals, but we also need to target people across the full spectrum who could and should be working in this industry. Whether it is apprentices through the Prince’s Trust, which we’ve just done recently, people who are looking for a career change, or indeed people who are looking to extend their working careers.”

Spellacey is also passionate about safety improvements in the sector and is an active member of the Road Workers’ Safety Forum. He has proactively supported and promoted measures to reduce the number of live carriageway crossings in order to improve road worker safety.

“From a BBMM perspective we’ve been integral in trials to reduce carriageway crossings and ultimately eliminate them. The challenge now is what the next big thing is. I think for us vehicle incursions, people who either by accident or by deliberate means decide to drive into our roadworks, are the next target for us.”

The pair remain confident about the future and reiterated their belief that this is a vital time for the industry.

“We want the government to continue to invest in us and trust us to deliver, as well as understand the strategic importance of the road network,” Spellacey said.

“A lot of what is happening makes me feel like we’re at that tipping point where we are going to see significant change in the industry. I think it is a fantastic industry to work in but we’re very coy in actually telling people about how good it is. We need to get out there and change the perception of the industry and share some of the really positive stories about working in highways,” concludes Allen. ☺