

A Local Authority's Perspective into Improving Utility Reinstatements

This paper describes Oldham Council's approach to using leading edge asset management principles, emerging Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP) tools and guidance, a private sector partner and a structured coring programme to drive improvements in the overall quality of its highway network, and in particular, utility reinstatements. The highways network is the local authority's most valuable asset group and so the economic benefit of ensuring future maintenance liabilities are kept to a minimum is significant.

Background

Oldham Council partnered with industry leading highways consultant, Mouchel, through its Unity Partnership Joint Venture in 2007. Initially, the contract focussed mainly on design services but by 2011 the scope of works also included Street Works and Network Management.

The Partnership was keen to leverage its private sector partner's wider knowledge and experience and so enlisted the support of the Mouchel Integrated Street Management (ISM) team. Working together, we quickly identified a number of opportunities to improve the way we work. Of particular interest was the monitoring regime of utility company works and a decision was taken in 2011 to focus on this particular improvement area. This decision was taken due to the ability of the improvements to drive positive changes in network quality, relationship building with the statutory undertakers and impact on the communities we serve.

The council's Street Works team were already carrying out the statutory minimum number of visual inspections for all Categories A, B and C works but through ISM's recommendations this was increased to 100% in the summer of 2011. Having full visibility of the reinstatements was the first step in identifying suitable sites for coring. Initially, a small random sample (circa 70) of visually compliant sites was marked up and passed to a coring contractor for sampling and testing.

The level of compliance prior to sampling and testing was unknown, although anecdotal evidence from other programmes in the region had suggested that compliance levels would be circa 50%.

Developing a Solution

When researching the options for asset management approaches and specifically the structured coring programmes, the Partnership consulted with Joint Authorities Group (JAG) UK and also with representatives from National Joint Utilities Group (NJUG) to ensure that the latest codes of practice and guidance notes were followed. It was clear that, in order for the programme to be a success and for it to maintain credibility with stakeholders, we needed to follow the Highways Authorities and Utilities Committee (HAUC) Good Practice advice note. In addition, the chosen contractor needed to have United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) accreditation and the highway authority should maintain open dialogue with the utility companies throughout the whole process. It was agreed from the very beginning that maintaining good relationships would be central to the programme's operating model.

Following the methodology taken from the Specification for the Reinforcement of Openings in Highways (SROH) third edition, testing would include dimensional compliance checks followed by bulk density, maximum density and air void calculation as appropriate.

With the sites now identified, the Partnership made contact with all regional utility companies advising of its intention to trial a structured coring programme. They were also informed about the process being adopted and the mechanisms for recovering incurred costs against any sites. A contractor was appointed and the trial began in September 2011.

Delivering the Programme

This initial trial yielded surprising results with 70-80% average non-complying reinstatements observed across all Utilities; with some it was far higher. These figures convinced the team to move to a full-scale programme, which commenced in April 2012. With rates being as high as they were, it was felt that the programme needed to put around half of all utility works forward for the coring programme with the proviso that this level would be monitored and reviewed periodically. Given the rate of non-compliance observed, it was also decided that a proportion of sites that remained within their guarantee period would also be tested.

During the early days, one of the major challenges for the team was in managing the large volume of paperwork, systems and processes needed to effect a programme on this scale (we were identifying around 300-400 new sites per month!). We have now completed a significant learning curve in this aspect of the programme, bringing major benefits in terms of our control and management of the process.

Additional inspector and administrator resources were recruited to handle the day to day management of the programme. In addition, an open market tender was undertaken to establish an expert coring contractor and laboratory that delivered the necessary value for money.

The tender attracted 17 expressions of interest, from which 5 were ultimately shortlisted. Aside from the obvious basic requirements to ensure best value, and also that testing is carried out in accordance with British Standards and appropriate guidance notes, the team responsible for awarding the contract were also looking for evidence of added value in Street Works. For this programme there was one clear winner: First Intervention Ltd demonstrated strong links with NJUG (its Managing Director is an associate member) and other industry bodies and had a history of delivering similar programmes around the country. Our tender exercise brought with it a commitment to generate local jobs and the programme has exceeded our expectations in this regard.

Over the past 2 years the association with First Intervention has been extremely positive while the programme has sought to differentiate itself from other structured coring programmes delivered around the country through building great relationships with all stakeholders. In 2013, the programme was shortlisted for the Mouchel Excellence Awards under the 'Partnership Working' banner.

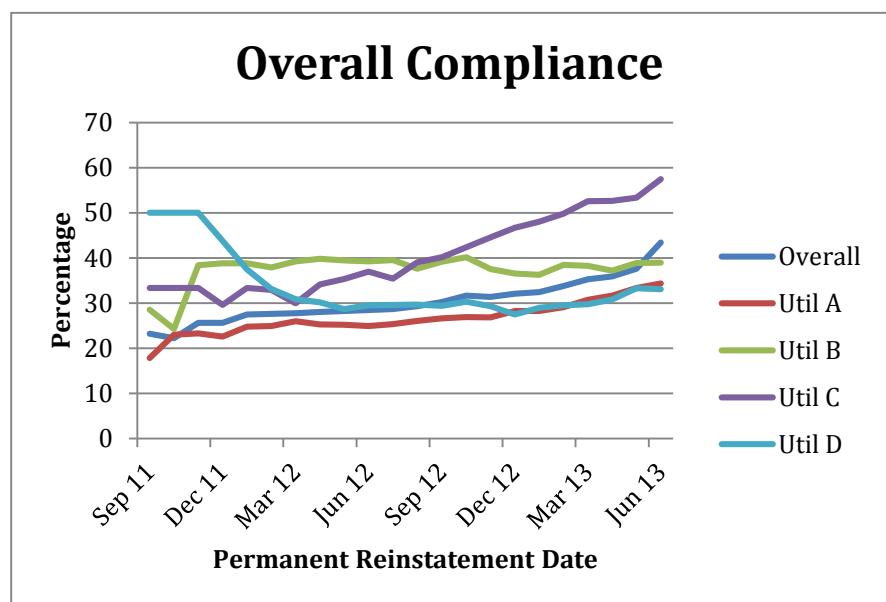
In April 2013, neighbouring council Tameside elected to commission The Unity Partnership to run its own structured coring programme to take advantage of the experience of the established team and the efficiencies gained through the added scale of a combined operation.

From the outset, regular meetings have taken place between the Partnership's delivery team and the regional utility company representatives with a remit to openly discuss the programme, present statistical data and trends, and, more recently, to showcase external guests who present new materials and technologies to assist in achieving a 'right first time' compliant reinstatement. We're supportive of new or innovative trials for new materials and we are about to host a training workshop delivered by First Intervention to help the utility company contractor partners understand why their reinstatements are not complying. Each of these steps is taken to support the shared goal of bring quantifiable improvements to the condition of the highway authority's most valuable asset.

Review of Performance

Together, Oldham and Tameside have investigated over 5,000 sites since the start of the programme and have collected and analysed significant volumes of data, which is proving invaluable in identifying non-complying sites.

In terms of the positive effects, all of the utilities without exception have improved their dimensional compliance over the last 2 years to around 90% for material layer thickness. Air void compliance has been harder to achieve but the statistical data is moving in the right direction – indeed, overall compliance across all utilities is now over 40%. In fact, Electricity North West was recently advised that its performance levels had exceeded our internally agreed target and consequently the decision was taken to reduce future testing on its works.



A Time to Reflect

Feedback suggests that the programme is viewed very positively by the Leadership of the Council and we are determined to build upon the successes achieved to date. Key to the success of our programme in the next phase of work will be an ability to remain flexible and responsive to improvements in the quality of reinstatements. It is also very pleasing to see the positive way in which the utilities have responded to this and other similar programmes and that there is a real willingness to address the quality issues and to work together on wider innovation and efficiency issues.

Whilst the current phase of the programme is intended to facilitate improvements to overall compliance by working with the utilities; inevitably the emphasis will shift over time as compliance levels increase to a period of helping to ensure a sustained network improvement.

There will come a time when it is no longer economically viable for the council to continue running a programme on this scale but this event will mark a significant milestone for us. It will be confirmation that the effort and investment needed to launch the programme in the first place will have finally paid off because the quality of utility reinstatements will have reached a high standard, thereby reducing the council's long-term liability.

As with any project, we've learned lessons along the way and have improved our systems and processes to make the programme run more efficiently. Key improvements include:

- Reduced the time from site identification to registering the defect notice through EToN
- Introduction of electronic records for test results
- Unique web-based access to UKAS certificates
- Reporting is now based on permanent reinstatement date rather than the programme month providing genuinely useful performance data
- Introduction of formal process diagrams for dealing with the defect process

The Next Steps

Critically, and in the spirit of openness, we share our data for both compliant and non-compliant results with the utilities which is an important aspect in helping them to understand their performance in context. We are also sharing our performance data with other Greater Manchester (GM) authorities so that collectively we can begin to understand the condition of the wider regional network and, over time, we hope to support NJUG in collecting data on a national level.

We're keen to share the knowledge we have gained in this area with other highway authorities and are currently engaged in preliminary discussions with a number of councils across the breadth of the country.

It has certainly been an interesting couple of years and we're looking forward to embracing the challenges that lie ahead.

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