

No pearls without grit



Budget cuts are forcing some authorities to fit gritting equipment to vehicles ostensibly used for other work. Chris Tindall spreads the news

Dedicated vehicles for gritting purposes are becoming a luxury for councils under pressure to cut costs. This is one reason why local authorities are exploring more cost-effective solutions as they face up to another uncertain winter.

One strategy to keep the wheels continually moving throughout the seasons is to use demountable or interchangeable gritters. Scotland's Highland Council discovered the benefits of this after investing in a Mercedes-Benz Unimog, which can be fitted with different equipment depending on the weather it encounters. An all-terrain model supplied by South Cave Tractors in East Yorkshire was funded by a partnership between the council and ski resort operator CML, with finance from the Scottish government.

James MacDonald, Highland Council's transport and logistics manager, says: "We had been relying on a dedicated snow-blowing vehicle until it reached the end of its life. The Unimog is a far more cost-effective solution, though, because it can be used in a variety of roles all year round."

The Unimog proved indispensable during last winter's Beast from the East, with a 5m³-capacity snow cutter-blower

and demountable gritter body carving a safe path to CairnGorn Mountain ski centre near Aviemore.

MacDonald continues: "With its ability to carry and power a variety of implements, and to pull a trailer, the Unimog is incredibly versatile. Our dedicated snowblower only shifted snow - it didn't grit - so there's an added function, too."

In more clement weather, the truck can be fitted with front-mounted mower and ditch-cutter attachment. Observes the transport and logistics manager: "The work [it's] currently undertaking is more commonly assigned to agricultural tractors - but they can't match the Unimog's 56mph on-road speed, which represents a huge advantage."

He concludes: "You can't have lorries sitting around waiting for winter. The size of our fleet was quite scary; we are serving an area bigger than Belgium up here! We've gone from having a large range of dedicated winter fleet vehicles - 114 gritters - but now only around 25% of that is dedicated."

South of the border, Leeds City Council (LCC) relies on four bulk gritters and 37 demountable gritters for winter maintenance, but it is now looking to reduce its fleet size, too.

A council spokeswoman says: "LCC believes demountable gritters are a

cost-effective solution. As the gritter body is demountable, the chassis can be utilised for other activities over the summer months.

"However, operators must be aware of the impact of running the vehicle with standard diesel, instead of red, and be aware of testing requirements. The chassis should be maintained every six to eight weeks, as is standard for any chassis, but the demountable gritter body only needs one major service per year."

Another approach is offered by winter risk management company Gritit, which services commercial and public sector sites, including pathways, access roads and car parks. It says many authorities did not budget for the severity of last year's winter, and were left looking for money in other areas. As a result, the process by which areas are gritted in future could change. Steve Webb, Gritit commercial director, says: "There is likely to be a greater take up of fixed-cost agreements, as these provide some certainty for budgeting for gritting. Our particular business model of servicing areas from local depots using mainly 4x4 vehicles proved itself this past winter."

Webb says the key to its success is using the size of vehicle and equipment that best suits its clients' premises: "We mostly use 4x4 vehicles with demountable ploughs and salt spreaders on the tailgate or with separate trailers. The size of these vehicles and equipment offers the best width and height access, manoeuvrability, precision spreading



and safety. HGVs can be dangerous in close confines, and the hoppers sit too high for much of our work.

"The smaller and lower hoppers on 4x4s allow salt to be distributed safely in car parks and also under parked vehicles. Gritit uses Boss salt hoppers – all models including the Forge 2.0 steel hopper and straight-blade snowploughs – and has done for a number of years."

SPREADERS AND SNOWPLOUGHS

Peacock Salt is the UK importer and distributor for Finland's Hilltip equipment, which includes snowploughs and spreaders that fit around pickup trucks. Paddie Hastie, Peacock Salt's winter equipment manager, says a popular product among customers is the IceStriker 850 salt spreader. He explains: "It holds just over one tonne [of salt], which keeps it compliant on light-range pickup trucks. Our main customers are private contractors and councils who normally have pickups in their fleet. Come winter, they put Hilltip units on and spread salt over car parks, paths of hospitals, schools, industrial estates and shopping centres."

Hastie says one benefit of Hilltip equipment is that it offers inbuilt GPS,

not only to track and trace gritter drivers, but also to provide a more accurate spread of salt. He adds: "It calculates vehicle speed so that it can spread 20g/m².

This is important; national guidelines say it should be 10g/m² if the temperature is below 2° and 20g/m² if it's below freezing." Measuring the amount of salt spread is also important because higher levels of deposition can make the situation worse: "It can be overkill on car parks, because the effectiveness of 40g/m² is not actually that great, and then you still get slips and falls."

The market for such equipment is growing, Hastie adds. "It's really picked up over the last four or five years. People are taking more care over their sites; owners are taking more responsibility over their lands. They're less expensive than standard gritters, too. I wouldn't entirely discount a claims culture either," he contends, referring to people's increasing desire to sue for injuries.



However, not everyone believes demountables or interchangeables are the future. According to Andrew Lupton, sales director at gritter and salt spreading vehicle manufacturer Econ, the

market is moving towards a seasonal long-hire business model, and that means more dedicated gritting vehicles. He says: "Among the many reasons for this are the hire contracts are all season long, that is, October to April, so the expenditure on gritters matches the income. Also, the size and type of vehicles that are required for gritting – 18-tonners and 26-tonne 6x4s – are not the sort of vehicles that would be used for general highway duties. There's also the lack of space in the summer to park gritters."

Still, things are looking bright for the Ripon, North Yorkshire manufacturer. In May it announced it has introduced a night shift at its factory to increase production of its Econ snow spreading and pothole repair vehicles. **TE**