

Knowledge is

Transport managers forced to work their vehicles harder and longer are finding interesting ways to make that work. Brian Tinham looks at commercial opportunities, but also new technology being adopted in the waste sector

As the economic situation afflicting the UK drags on, many transport operators are being forced to cut costs. For some, that includes reviewing their hopes for investment in new vehicles, while, for others, it also entails reconsidering that old chestnut – outsourcing some or all of their workshop activities.

If it's the former, two increasingly common approaches are to consider extending vehicle lease periods and examine the options for shared roles. However, treading either path also has a knock-on effect – putting yet more pressure on the technicians and facilities whose job it is to keep them going.

Bob Scarfe, fleet director at SFS (Specialist Fleet Services), a contract hire and workshop management specialist in Northamptonshire, says he sees it all the time, especially in the waste industry. "Local authorities are looking at ways to reduce costs and vehicle fleets are a clear target," he explains. "One trend is towards extending contract periods. Another is getting as much as possible out of their vehicles by multi-tasking, particularly among the lighter vehicles. But both approaches mean that fleets have to work harder, so require more maintenance."

His point is clear: both approaches lead to obvious short-term savings, but there are also cost implications. So, if lease extensions are in prospect, fleet engineers need to assess each vehicle, evaluating its condition and suitability for extended working. They also need to think about the roles and the likely productivity of ageing vehicles before pressing the 'go' button. Meanwhile, if the preferred choice is multi-tasking, be aware of a potential impact on the contract as well, if that's based on mileage and/or working hours.

"There may be alternatives that are more economical. Perhaps buying new vehicles, but fewer of them, or changing the established routes of, for example, refuse collection vehicles and

sweepers," states Scarfe. However, if that's a step too far – or not enough – then we're back to costs, in terms of staff, time and facilities required for servicing hard-pressed vehicles.

One solution is contracting



out. "By outsourcing [workshops], councils can save money and improve the efficiency of their operations," asserts Scarfe. "Other benefits include additional revenue streams and cost savings by either sharing facilities with neighbouring authorities or offering workshop services."

Better use of technology

But there are other ways to improve efficiency and cut costs – not least through making better use of technology. Waste and recycling management specialist Biffa, for instance (which this year celebrates its centenary), has been working with telematics developer CMS SupaTrak, rolling out its EcoTrak system. Like most similar systems, it gathers data from the vehicle CANbus that can be used to identify driver behaviour, but also trends, including real-time mpg, green-band driving, speed and PTO usage – all of which have implications for the fleet manager, but also the workshop.

Jodie Scott, category manager for Biffa, explains

power



that the company ran an initial benchmarking exercise – with the technology covertly fitted to vehicles. That was followed by training and mentoring for underperforming drivers by SAFED-approved staff. Then, with a substantial fuel-saving potential proven, EcoTrak went fleet-wide.

SITA UK fleet manager Paul Shipman says his company's experience was similar, stating that fuel savings calculated across the trial period alone were around 12%. SITA UK has also now rolled out EcoTrak technology, in its case to more than 650 vehicles across 32 sites.

But, for both organisations, it needn't stop at fuel savings. Why? Because last year CMS SupaTrak took the lead role in launching Optimised Waste Logistics (OWL) – effectively an online portal for local authorities and the waste industry that brings other vehicle management systems into a single browser interface. Not only does that offer the prospect of enabling fleet and workshop managers (and also drivers) to cut the time they spend jumping in and out of different systems, but it also brings some very valuable extra insights.

Jason Airey, managing director of CMS SupaTrak, explains that OWL came out of requests from several local authorities. Things came to a head last year, he says, when one fleet manager, working with three companies' systems, suggested bringing all parties together, with a view to developing an all-encompassing online waste management portal. The goal: a single display, covering all aspects of the authority's vehicle data – where they are, the weight being carried, camera information, but also diagnostics.

CMS developed the system, initially to host its own telematics information, along with Vehicle Weighing Solutions' onboard weighing data and Vision Techniques' safety and security information. Interest is growing, according to Airey, as early adopters record success.

Massive savings

Birmingham City Council, for example, is reporting a 14% saving in collection costs on its RCVs (refuse collection vehicles) through the use of an accredited OWL partner's technology – Dotted Eyes' route optimisation system – in conjunction with telematics. It's all about using the data together, rather than separately, confirms the council.

Other success stories include Oxford City Council, which claims an improved service to both trade and domestic customers. That's due, in part, to a reduction in administration time spent on RCVs, as well as efficiency improvements, as the fleet has become easier to manage. However, additional benefits have included fewer accidents and insurance claims, but also – importantly – reduced vehicle wear and tear, downtime and hence maintenance costs.

It's the latter point that should strike the loudest chord for struggling operators and their workshops. Airey says that one unnamed OWL user has gone one step further – extending its system specifically to collect diagnostic information from both the chassis (Mercedes Econic), and the body and equipment (Geesinknorba) ECU networks. Crucially, it now automatically reports on the detail of vehicle health – along with telematics, weighing and

Left: OWL technology gets recognition from the Welsh Assembly
Far left: Dennis Eagle RCV dashboard with its integrated bin weighing and camera display, as well as chassis and body diagnostics

Waste management specialist Biffa has been working with telematics developer CMS SupaTrak, rolling out its EcoTrak

camera data. "One of the aspects they are monitoring is engine temperature, so they can keep tabs on the vehicle's behaviour throughout the day. The system can be set to trigger an alert in real time, if it breaches a threshold for too long. Then the workshop can intervene early," he explains. "But they're also picking up body diagnostics, too, in real time... So they're building up a detailed

picture of pack press frequency, how many bin lifts, weights, hydraulic fluid pressure etc, as well as any fault codes."

It's about using the technology both to direct and prioritise maintenance interventions, so saving cost and time. Airey concedes that the data is available anyway, but makes the point that the OWL approach brings everything back in real time and in one place. "Our system is all web-based, using GPRS or 3G, depending on what's available. Geesinknorba are now building our system into their bodies at the factory level, because they want to help their customers manage maintenance on their bodies better."

And Dennis Eagle is also active. "The system is now fitted to many of our vehicles," comments Andy Graves, marketing manager. "It can capture chassis and body diagnostics, as well as being linked to bin-weighing, camera systems etc, as an integrated package. Also, the data is provided in real time, via GPRS/GSM, to allow fleet managers to view location, speed etc. And it can be linked with waste management systems for bin weighing and RFID, routing systems etc."

The transport industry may be stretched by the economic situation, but some technology solutions are clearly coming together to help. **TE**



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