Taking Sides

Changing from conventional RCVs to a fleet of side-loaders for domestic collections seems a high risk strategy. Moving to a demountable body system at the same time? That really is ambitious. **Malcolm Bates** visits Horsham to find out more…

New ideas in middle England? Horsham District Council now uses HN Schorling demountable body side-loaders on Volvo chassis for its front-line domestic collections

The countryside around Horsham is about as lovely as Britain gets. It's home to around 50000 households and, compared to some parts of the country, it's pretty free from the nastier elements that inflict our "broken society". Horsham isn't "broken" – it's in rather good shape, actually, and part of the reason for that is the residents wouldn't settle for anything less.

So why then has the in-house team at Horsham District Council been involved in one of the most ambitious and demanding projects to change from an ordinary "middle England" approach to domestic collections, to one that is so controversial it's likely to attract downright hostility in some quarters? After all, side-loaders are "foreign", aren't they? They cost workers' jobs. Besides, they're unlikely to work in the UK because we lack the collective discipline to put our bins out neatly on the right day, don't we? Should public sector professionals take both career and organisational risks on behalf of their Council Tax-paying customers? After all, it is public money…

"Yes, all of those charges flashed before my eyes at times over the last four years," Ian Jopling smiles, "but the more we looked at the issues, the more we realised we had to do something radical." Ian is head of operational services at Horsham District Council but, to be honest, he doesn't look like a radical… but back to the story.

"Four years ago, the collection operation was being undertaken by a fleet of basically bog standard single compartment bodied 26-tonne 6x4 RCVs. But when it became clear that several established landfills were due to close and no more options were available to us, we were facing a considerable hike in the number of miles each RCV would have to travel," Ian continued. "The key issue was, that although we have six suitable local sites from which our fleet of vehicles could be deployed, none of them had the space to become a waste transfer facility. However we looked at it, we were facing an increase in operating costs, while the quality of the service would probably also suffer," he concluded.

A high risk strategy? Both head of operations at Horsham District Council, Ian Jopling (right) and project co-ordinator, Alex Ayling, seem pretty relaxed about the changeover, but then a lot of planning has gone into this project

No Collection Shift

LEAVING THOSE issues aside, a completely new recyclable collection regime also needed implementing. But to make the job just a bit more challenging, Horsham residents were never going to submit to a fortnightly residual waste collection, partly because that would have quite rightly been seen as a reduction in service, but also because all the domestic waste bins are 140-litre capacity, so they wouldn't allow it.

The Horsham District Council "patch" covers an area of over 200 sq mi, making it one of the largest district councils – in proportion to population – in England. "While the main north to south roads are fast enough, getting from east to west can be another matter. The rural roads are slow, narrow and come with lots of overhanging trees," Ian added.

OK, what would you have done next? Let's consider the issues. The need to collect more individual waste streams and boost recycling; the need to keep the existing 140-litre residual waste bins; to keep RCV transit mileage down;

Initial trials determined that 6x2 rear-steer side-loaders were more manoeuvrable than a traditional 6x4 RCV. So far, damage levels have been reduced since the changeover

and, for everyone's sake, make any change in as seamless and pain-free manner as possible… without the residents getting upset. Tough call, huh?

Four Years On

IT'S NOW four years since the project started and the decisions have been made. Some £4.5m has been invested and a totally new fleet of RCVs delivered. After trials, crew training and an almost military level of planning that involved a five-phase "zoned" introduction process, Horsham's new RCV fleet finally went fully operational a few weeks ago.

In case you haven't worked it out yet, the frontline domestic collection service in Horsham is now being handled by HN Schorling "paddle compaction" side-loader bodies mounted on Volvo 6x2 rear-steer chassis. True, there is also a "hit squad" of four DAF 12-tonners, fitted with compaction bodies with rear bin-lifters, but these are for the really remote rural areas where it just isn't practical to send in a 26-tonner.

So how does the new regime work then? Firstly, it maintains the weekly residual waste collection service. The same basic vehicles also provide an alternating bi-weekly recyclables collection service. "It's commingled cans, glass, paper and cartons one week, green waste the next," Ian explained. Okay, that cuts out the need for twin compartment vehicles having to travel in opposite directions at once, but how does it cut down on transit mileage?

This is where it gets interesting… Horsham has selected the clever HN Schorling hooklift-compatible *demount body* side-loader. Remember the even spread of depots? There's enough room to store plenty of spare empty "boxes" at each, for each specific waste faction. When each "box" (a sealed hooklift body pod with compaction door at one end and barn doors for discharge at the other) on the collection vehicle chassis is full, it heads back to a depot to meet up with a "transfer tug".

In addition to the fleet of 20 side-loaders, there is a trio of new three-axle hooklift chassis (two Volvo and one Renault) each pulling a Wheelbase tri-axle close coupled drawbar trailer. These take away the full containers for disposal and bring in a fresh supply of empties. Interestingly, unlike other authorities that employ a third party contractor, Horsham runs its own bulk waste and recyclable materials "trunk" service, to keep control of the whole process. Simple really.

But to say "it's simple" is to pass over the attention to detail that has gone – largely unseen – into this project. For example, as a result of the change, the services of one of the three-man crews on each RCV was no longer required, but instead of making large-scale redundancies, Ian and his management team offered every member of staff the option to train as an LGV driver: a package worth well over £1 000 per head. ▸▸

Left: highest utilisation is obtained by working four 10-hour shifts per week. That needs two drivers per truck, but the second can help position badly placed bins, as here, on tight corners

Right: much of the success of the change to side-loading has been down to intensive driver training. Former driver, Alex Ayling, is convinced training is the key

Providing good clear information to the residents is the other ingredient that has helped ensure success. This selector wheel user guide and other brochure graphics are spot-on

Valuable Assets

WHY? "WE didn't want to lose people with local knowledge. They are a valuable asset in our business, so we decided to try and help them enhance their job prospects. In return, we need an increased level of flexibility – the new side-loaders work an intensive 10-hour shift, four days a week. To do that, we needed a two-man team on each unit," Ian explained.

While he acknowledges that side-loaders work on a single-manned basis elsewhere in Europe, he explains why that isn't on Horsham's radar. "Firstly, a 10-hour shift is beyond the capability of a single driver. Secondly, as the units are left-hand drive and have to travel on rural roads, we decided two trained drivers on each truck was the best solution from a safety viewpoint, while providing help with poorly-placed bins," he added.

So, if the way in which this project has been planned is worthy of praise (which it is) then perhaps I should also tell you about some of the people behind it. Obviously, in terms of "potential career damage", if it all went wrong, Ian Jopling heads the list. He has been the driving force behind it, but is modestly full of praise for the local politician for supporting him, and Roger Smee, formally with HN Logistics and now special projects engineer at Dennis Eagle (HN Schorling and Dennis are both Ros Roca Environmental group companies). In turn, Roger is keen to suggest the credit is due to the two Alex's at Horsham – that's assistant head of operational services, Alex Gander, and former RCV driver, Alex Ayling, who took on responsibility of implementing the changeover on a day-to-day basis.

Oh, there's something else I forgot to mention… Alex Ayling is a, well, put it this way… she's not a bloke! If that's going to cause a sharp intake of breath in what is still very much "a man's world", then I should add that Alex can wield a binwagon as well as anyone. Not only that, it's clear she has the respect and support of both senior management and the crews, and that's a priceless attribute.

Empty residual, or even part-loaded recyclable containers can be stored at local depots, until required. This ensures full loads are delivered at the optimum time

Before I turned up to take pictures, during the week when the final phase went live, one unit picked up a puncture the night before; another refused to start first thing; and a third managed to get a complete wheeled bin jammed in the compaction hopper, as a result of a householder filling it full of metal. Throughout this Alex calmly got things sorted, contacting other drivers to come in and help the crews now running late.

"Things happen," she smiled. "I'm really lucky in my job, the crews realise we all have to work together and that means being flexible. Mind you, the damage caused by the overweight bin being torn from the lifter hasn't happened before. On side-loaders the driver doesn't get to look inside each bin, so such a thing is hard to predict. We'll have to look at that issue," she added thoughtfully.

But wasn't there any objection to the change, from residents and crews ? "Yeah, when I first saw what was proposed, I objected," Alex smiled. "I loved driving my RCV, but after a horse-riding accident I got transferred into the office before being volunteered to manage the changeover. When I first tried a side-loader I hated it and thought they would never work here but, after training, I've completely changed my mind," she added. "It's the way forward."

"Learning from Alex, we instigated a comprehensive driver training programme for all our team," Ian explained. "We also kept residents informed of the change and why we were making it. So far, the numbers of missed bins, accidents, equipment damage and complaints have been reduced by something like 50 percent.

"At the same time, residual waste tonnages are down by around 30 percent, while our recycling ratios are now at 55 percent and rising," he confirmed. Mission accomplished? I'll let you decide. MVO

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Unusually, both the collection and bulk trunking of laden containers is undertaken by the in-house team using a mix of Volvo and Renault chassis pulling tri-axle Wheelbase trailers