

# A cut above others

In 2002 the government launched its 'Street Scene Initiative' designed to improve the environment in which residents live. One aspect relates to paths, verges and public spaces including, importantly, the grass. LAPV looks in depth at the measures which the London Borough of Harrow Council took to change to a 'cut and collect' policy.



The 'big bag system' has been the ideal solution for the 'cut & collect' service in Harrow

The London Borough of Harrow has been chosen as a Beacon authority, partly because of the range of domestic dwellings within its boundaries – ranging from high-rise council flats to leafy suburbs with large, expensive private homes. Part of the Borough consists of private housing from the 1930s, which has not officially been adopted by the council. However, the residents were not maintaining the roadsides – causing a problem for refuse collection vehicles. As a goodwill gesture, the council has also taken on the maintenance of these roadsides.

During 2002 and 2003, the Council instigated the South Harrow Project, covering 1/9th of the Borough, in which targets were set for cutting the grass on roadside verges. Key to meeting the stricter targets was a change from a 'cut & drop' policy to a 'cut & collect' policy. This seemingly 'simple' decision has

huge implications for the mowing equipment used, manpower and rotas and support equipment such as collection wagons. Harrow's Fleet Manager instigated a trial of a number of manufacturers' equipment. This process was managed by the council's grounds maintenance machinery adviser Hayden Engineers.

## Auger system

Colin Hayden proposed a trial of numerous mowers including rotary, flail and cylinder from the leading manufacturers; one was a flail mower – the Profihopper from Amazone. The Profihopper was preferred by the council staff because it performs in all conditions and does not suffer the same 'clogging' when cutting wet grass as a rotary mower. This is because it uses an auger system. However, a full council cabinet was asked to visually judge the performance, based on the best looking

cut. The Profihopper was felt to give the best cut.

The council initially purchased four Profihoppers during the trial and then rolled them out over the Borough over 18 months by leasing another 18 from Fraikin. As the Borough has to contend with very heavy traffic congestion, it is impractical to have a van trailing every Profihopper as it would cause traffic problems. The distances involved would also have been an issue. Colin developed a solution to the problem by developing what he called, a 'big bag system'. When the Profihopper's collection unit becomes full, the unit gives an audible warning. The driver then attaches a large specially developed bag with straps to the rear of the machine. The Profihopper's hydraulic system then empties the cuttings and any other collected waste into the bag. The bag is then left at the roadside until a flatbed van comes to collect it, via the use of an



The Profihopper collects everything it travels over

onboard crane/lift. In total, the whole process takes just a few minutes.

Paul Chase, London Borough of Harrow Council's Fleet Manager commented: "When the initial trial was undertaken, Parks and Street Cleaning were two different departments. The two functions have now been merged. Additionally, the council was previously split into three areas – but these have now been merged under one management body. The benefit of these two changes for us is that there is now greater flexibility in the use of equipment."

### Cut & collect

As part of the Street Scene Initiative, Harrow received some funding from Central Government. Now that trial has run its course, Paul comments on the situation today: "We are maintaining the same high standards and a cut & collect policy is still being carried out on a three week basis. Previously, a 'cut & drop' policy in which grass cuttings were simply left to rot, was implemented on a four week rota. Additionally, the grass at roadsides has been replaced with rye grass, which is more suited to withstanding the abuse that it is subjected to, particularly from vehicles mounting the kerbs and roadside – for parking or for residents' access to drives. The downside is that rye grass grows more quickly, so a four weekly rota would be insufficient during spring and summer."

Another benefit of the new system is that it has dramatically improved the council's performance vis-à-vis recycling targets. Each Profihopper is collecting 67 tonnes of grass per month – all of which is sent to a composting facility at Willesden. Paul says: "In 2006, Harrow was recycling 32% of its waste. Before the introduction of the Profihopper and the new 'cut & collect' system, that

amount was just 22%. By 2010, the council aims to be recycling 45% of its waste."

Another reason that the Profihopper was selected is that it collects everything it travels over, including refuse such as drinks cans; other mowers simply eject such foreign objects – normally at speed, which can have implications for health and safety or damage to property (usually vehicles). As the majority of the grass cut is in residential areas (85%) as opposed to highways, there is more litter. Under the new system, most of this debris can be separated by the driver of the van; this is because the litter works its way to the top by gravity as the bag is emptied.

The Profihopper can also pick up fallen leaves in winter, something rotary mowers cannot do as effectively. It is therefore ideally suited to the new structure in which parks and streets are merged because of the problem of rotting leaves in parks. This also helps with the recycling figures.

### All year round

For these reasons, triple mowers are only practically useful for nine months of the year whereas the Profihoppers are used year round. This does however cause an issue with maintenance; traditionally, equipment is usually given a thorough service during winter. Although Harrow had 22 Profihoppers, the initial four have now been traded in, but because of the new management structure and the fact that the Profihopper can run on all terrains (roadsides, highways, schools and parks) the council is able to manage with 15 units. Harrow operates 18 and feels it is the ideal fleet number because up to three can be in for servicing at any one time. If a fleet of rotary mowers were used additional grounds keeping equipment would be required in winter.

Additionally, due to climate change and the unpredictable British weather, even in summer, council staff can no longer rely on dry weather when an area is due for cutting.

Another advantage of the Profihopper is that it is small enough to access childrens' nurseries, whereas a tractor, traditionally used by 'Parks' departments, would be too large. Equally the Profihopper is powerful enough and with sufficient capacity and quality of cut, yet light enough for high impact areas such as football pitches, bowling greens and golf fairways – areas traditionally serviced by tractors or smaller ride on mowers. In fact, Harrow dedicates a number of Profihoppers solely to Parks, because they are so versatile.

Harrow Council has taken the decision to trial two of the latest Profihoppers. So impressed with Colin's design were the Amazone engineers, they have worked with him to develop their own dedicated 'Big Bag System'. Commenting on the new Profihoppers, Joe Weston of Amazone Groundcare said: "Amazone equipment has proved popular with buyers – whether farmers or groundskeepers because they listen to users when designing or updating their products. The improvements identified by Colin and Harrow Council are evidence of this in the launch of our latest Profihopper."

Steve Dimmock, Assistant Fleet Manager of Harrow Council sums up, "Any large urban council should take a close look at the Profihopper for the vast majority of their fleet – for its flexibility, year round use and ease of access to narrow streets and park entrances."

