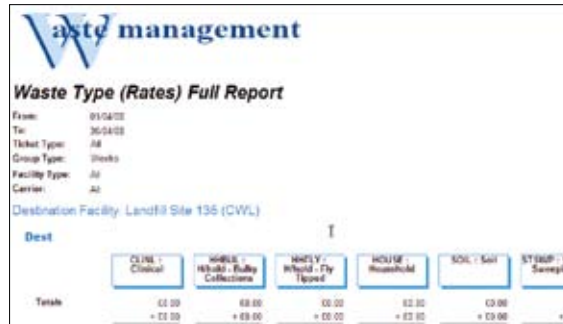




Tessella software in action for a waste company



Making data easy

Big waste contracts and the need for better data is making many local authorities look at upgrading their software systems. **Andrea Height** reports

■ HAVING USEFUL DATA AT YOUR FINGERTIPS TO RUN REPORTS AND ANALYSES IS ONE THING.

Having to enter the same data into multiple systems is quite another. Bridging the gap between the two generally means finding a software system that can take you from the drudgery of raw data entry to useful data goldmine in as painless a way as possible.

West Sussex County Council decided to make the software leap after it signed a 25-year PFI waste contract in 2004, which required it to measure performance, incentives and share information.

The £540 million contract covers seven waste collection authorities and waste collected at its household waste recycling sites, meaning there are multiple points for waste data to come in from. As the county council had been using eight data systems, it knew it would need new software to support the contract, so put out a public tender for the work. IT consultant Tessella won the contract, and worked with the county council to establish its data and software requirements and create a system to handle it all.

The system had an effect straight away. County →

SMEs SHOULD INVEST IN INTEGRATED SOFTWARE

Waste and Recycling software specialist ISB Global feels that to survive in this competitive environment, small- to medium-sized waste and recycling companies must understand the benefits of investing in integrated business management software to cover finance and operations.

While each company will have different issues and requirements, ISB Global sales and marketing manager Matthew Gawn says that the key issue shared by most companies is the need to manage their resources more efficiently. This will lead to better customer service, save on administration time, meet legislative requirements, allow for centralised control, speed reporting and increase profitability.

To ensure the development of an open, honest and trustworthy partnership with potential clients, ISB Global runs paid workshops as part of the initial design phase of the software installation.

This is part of business software SAP's rapid implementation methodology and Prince 2 project management. It also allows the drafting of a document to denote current business processes and how the business process should be after the



HTL Order Schedule Manager

software has been installed. The workshop reports contain a list of deliverables, which are the specific outcomes that a client needs a new software system to achieve.

Mr Gawn says: "At the end of the workshops, clients will have a document that shows them what improvements can be made in their business, such as controls around job and order scheduling, vehicle and driver management, customer relationship management, reporting for compliance and business intelligence. Although there are many variables, the

return on investment can be expressed as a monetary or over-time-figure that makes the justification for investment easier to understand."

It is not uncommon for smaller waste management and recycling companies to key in the same data into different systems up to 10 times as part of the end-to-end process across the company.

"A great example of this is taking an order. Think of how many times a company duplicates effort by entering that data more than once. It may only take a few minutes – but why not time it? Then multiply that by how many users duplicate the work, then multiply it by how many times a day or week or month they may duplicate it again. Multiplying it by the hourly or daily operating cost if you have one, or a salary or wage if you don't, gives a good indicator of the saving that could be made," Gawn says.

The company's stand at last year's RWM exhibition saw lots of interest from companies coming into the sector – renewable energy, recycling and environmental companies – bringing with them a fresh attitude and appreciation of the time and cost saving efficiencies of integrated software.

STRENGTHENING FOUNDATIONS



Software provider Qurius's environmental business unit director Jason Fazackerley (left) says he is seeing more investment in software from the waste and recycling sector.

"At the moment it's about good housekeeping and getting fitter and leaner rather than expanding," he says. "The cash is there but people are just being more careful about how they spend it."

This investment extends from small to large companies, although Fazackerley says some are introducing systems in phases: "Many are looking at getting good systems in place to strengthen their foundations, preparing their businesses for sale or expansion."

Two keys areas that companies are focusing on are:

- taking costs out of their businesses by removing duplication, streamlining and having integrated solutions
- using alert systems that flag up any inconsistencies in data so these can be reacted to quickly.

Fazackerley explains: "We have a client in the metals sector that had been paying £100/tonne for scrap cars but, within a 24-hour period, the price dropped to £15/tonne. The only reason the company was able to react so quickly was because it had an alert system which flagged up the price drop immediately. This meant the company could drop its prices and distribute this information quickly, so halting the flow of cars into its yard. Some of its competitors took a week or two to react and this had a big impact on their cash flow."

council business manager Ian Spicer says: "We saw immediate benefits. Information that had taken up to a year to acquire was available every month and access to that information was simple and straightforward."

Tessella software specialist Dr Chris Maré, who helped develop the system for West Sussex, says it is capable of holding all the data related to a waste department in a county council.

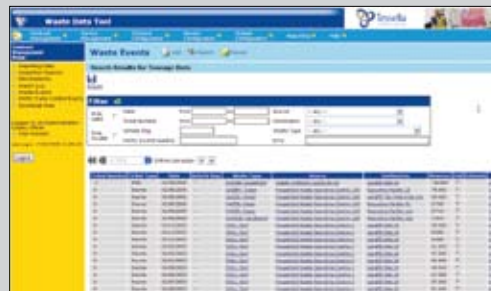
"When West Sussex won the PFI contract, it needed the tools to manage that contract and all the data," he says. "We started from scratch with West Sussex. Government tenders have very sparse requirements, so we went through a requirements capturing exercise to get the detailed needs of the county council and then developed the system."

The software package is one that Tessella is proud of – able to take information, mainly tonnage data and vehicle registrations, from all the relevant sites, including those of the council's contractors. Industry standard username and password access controls are used to access the system, which pulls all the data together using a simple web browser. Being web-based, the system does not require any additional infrastructure because sites tend to have internet access. The web browser format is familiar to staff from their day-to-day IT use, and people conducting site inspections can input information using pocket PCs connected over a mobile phone network.

Mr Spicer says the system has cut the time spent on basic data processing by 75 per cent, "enabling our staff to focus on more productive and interesting work, resulting in improved contract management". He adds: "For the first time we had information that was accurate and auditable, error rates reduced from more than 30 per cent to less than 5 per cent, and problem-solving that was taking several weeks to complete now takes a few hours."

SOFTWARE REQUIREMENTS

- Collating, reconciling and reporting data derived from all service providers within its contract
- Maintaining a catalogue of the different types of waste that were managed
- Defining the waste management facilities that were used by the council and its contractors
- Defining valid disposal routes for each waste stream
- Recording and measuring against targets set for each contractor.



On the back of Tessella's solution for West Sussex, it also won a tender for Cambridgeshire County Council ahead of its PFI contract. Tessella tweaked the system to suit Cambridgeshire, which has been recognised in an Environment Agency report on data quality for the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme as being "particularly good" and an example of best practice. The report said: "The web-based system allows robust data to be collected. The system itself is user friendly and straightforward. The information produced and the cross-checks on it allow the authority to have a very high level of confidence in its data."

Cambridgeshire is now trialling an application to upload data straight to the WasteDataFlow database, making it a 20-minute job every month rather than the more laborious chore it has been until now.

While Tessella says the software meets the requirements of councils, there are always areas that can be developed. Inspectors in Cambridgeshire, for example, input the relevant data into their PDAs when they carry out site visits but they cannot yet upload photos to the system remotely, so areas such as these offer opportunities for fine-tuning and enhancing.

Tessella sees opportunities for such systems in the local authority market, particularly with the current drive by Defra to produce higher quality data, along with the due diligence and statistical evidence required by waste PFI contracts. Dr Maré says: "There is a lot of focus on the local authority market and those are the people who will see the benefit of such a system."

But while a new software system is all well and good and can help with efficiency and ease, in terms of creating useful data Dr Maré says to remember the adage 'rubbish in, rubbish out' – a reminder that the most important part of a good system is ensuring that the information going into it in the first place is of a high quality. ■