

Brent Council cuts fleet costs by

£200,000, with new

Rediffusion-Based Transport

Management System..

Soaring vehicle fleet costs — from purchase prices to petrol, oil and maintenance — afflict local authorities as much as any commercial operator. Although not always recognised as such, the local authorities of Britain are among the largest fleet operators in the country, with a diverse range of vehicles to be kept manned and on the road, winter and summer, from small saloon cars and mini-vans to tipper lorries and refuse collection vehicles.

Managing these fleets has similarly become an increasing challenge, as pressures to reduce costs increase in direct proportion to the size of the financial commitment involved. Today, this commitment can be in the multimillion pound category for even moderately sized local authorities, leading to an increasing search for cost-effective, computerised methods of making better use of the vehicle fleet.

Computerised fleet management, of course, is not new, but existing systems are primarily targeted at commercial fleet operators, who were the first to turn to such methods. As a result, few are truly compatible with the data and management reporting requirements of local authority users. In particular, most do not meet the need of a local authority to allocate costs and charges across a range of internal user departments, nor to match the (usually batch) financial reporting requirements of typical local authority central mainframe accounting systems.

An extensive but fruitless search for a standard commercial package that could serve the needs of the 400+ vehicle fleet operated by the London Borough of Brent convinced that authority to develop its own system instead, to operate on its proven Rediffusion minicomputer.

Three years into the project, and with measured fleet management savings reaching £200,000 a year, the system has been so successful that it is now being marketed to other local authorities through an independent software house, Middlesex Software Services Limited of Twickenham.

The tailored fleet management system has been further enhanced by



Picture shows Brent Council's vehicle workshop which is responsible for maintaining the entire 400 plus vehicle fleet, from mini-vans and passenger cars to refuse collection vehicles and overhead repairs vehicles. Enhancements currently being developed will automatically generate acquisitions for required parts when a vehicle is booked in — saving off the road and workshop time.

Middlesex Software's addition of a complete stores control system, independently developed but interfaced with the transport package. Together, they can provide computerised control of vehicle spares (as well as any other local authority inventories) linked into fleet management and workshop requirements.

Additional, one-off savings on stores alone at Brent cut £40,000 off its total stock holdings, ranging from building materials to stationery items, in addition to vehicle spares. The net result, according to Middlesex Software director Keith Russell, is a payback on investment measured in months rather than years.

The key advantage of the system, Russell says, is the way it brings directly to end users all the dynamic information they need to manage the vehicle fleet most efficiently, while still meeting the requirements of the data

processing and finance departments.

"Local authorities are structured differently to commercial organisations," he says. "Our transport management and stores systems start from this premise to provide a service that meets operational and management requirements, with no upset to existing computing routines."

Local authorities are structured differently to commercial organisations

The system was developed from the outset to address two separate but equally important requirements. One was from the finance and accounts side, where there was a need for accurate historical records of costs on global and departmental allocation scales. The other was from a fleet and

workshop management aspect, where up-to-the-minute operational information was required to make optimum use of the fleet at all times. Such a system would tell the manager, for example, the current status of vehicles and drivers — whether each is available, whether already booked and so on. In addition, the system should assist with making and monitoring bookings, scheduling of vehicles and drivers and rescheduling where necessary.

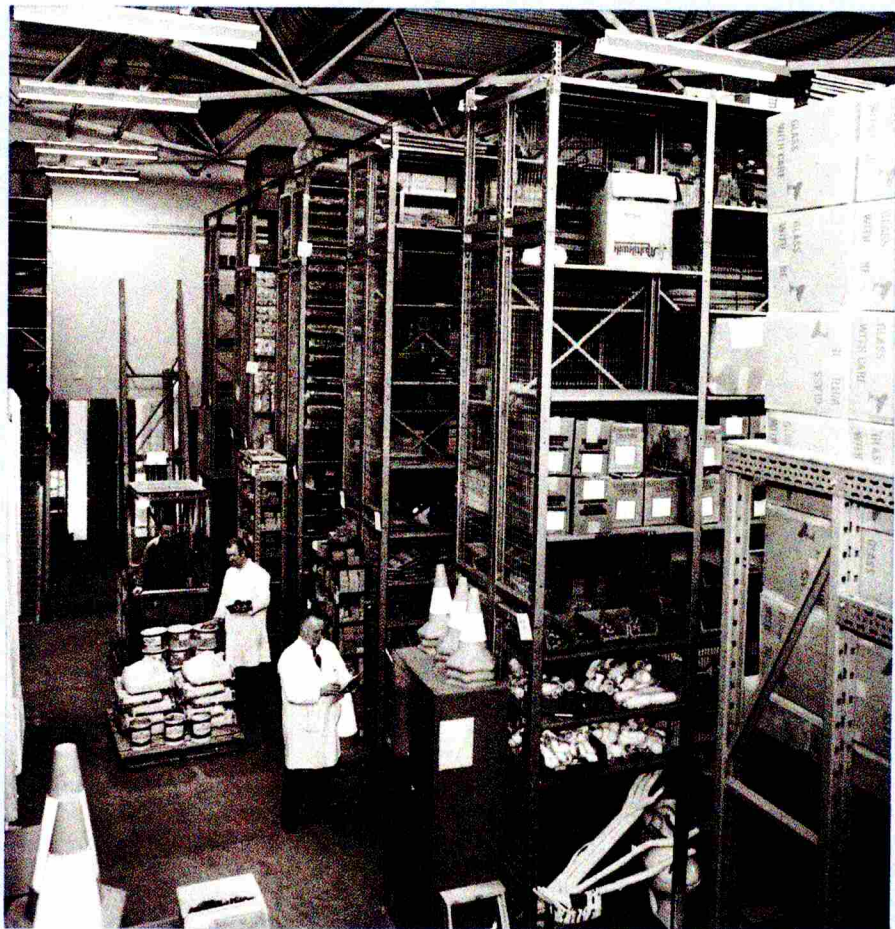
When breakdowns occur, the system should be capable of helping to plug the gap at minimum cost, and to get the vehicle back on the road by judicious use of workshop scheduling. Routing maintenance needs to be handled equally carefully, to take vehicles off the road at least critical times and to balance cost vs benefit.

The Middlesex Software/Brent transport system is also designed to incorporate full maintenance and repair histories, by vehicle, make and department, to the Institute of Road Transport Engineers' Vehicle Maintenance Reporting Standard (VMRS) coding structure. By evaluation of such histories, fleet managers can determine not only actual repair costs but reliability statistics down to component level for each type of vehicle in the fleet. Such analyses can provide an invaluable guide to negotiations with vehicle and parts suppliers and provide facts on which well-informed future buying decisions can be based. Additional historical records, such as for fuel use by vehicle type and driver, provide further information to assist fleet managers to optimise their budget spend.

The stores system, meanwhile, is designed to keep on-line records of all stock issues and receipts. It will generate official orders, track these against receipts and report orders outstanding on demand. At Brent, it will potentially look after 30,000 stock items but is capable of expansion.

Longer term, Middlesex plans to enhance the system to automatically generate stores requisitions for required parts at the time a vehicle is booked in for repair. Ultimately, the transport system will be used to match maintenance work with the availability not only of parts but of any specialist labour and workshop resources that may be required for particular jobs.

At Brent, the systems are available to end users via a network of remote terminals and printers scattered across the council's depot. The R2830 minicomputer supporting them is some four miles away in the data preparation section of the finance department where it runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week — much of which is unmanned. The proven reliability of Rediffusion hardware, used by Brent and many other local authorities for years, was a



Some 30,000 stock items are being brought under the control of Brent Council's Rediffusion-based stores system, which is designed to maintain on-line records of all stock issues and receipts. It will generate official orders, track these against receipts and report orders outstanding on demand.

significant factor in its choice for the transport and stores systems, Russell says.

"Brent has used Rediffusion data preparation equipment for some years, and more recently installed an R1800/30 (since upgraded to the R2830) minicomputer for the development of various data processing applications," he says. "Choosing Rediffusion provided the council with a proven product, and one that offered considerable flexibility for expansion. In addition, the powerful operating system and 'Editor' programming language, together with the R-range database handling capabilities, made it possible to develop the systems over a very short timescale.

Choosing Rediffusion provided the council with a proven product

"The fact that many local authorities already have, or are in the process of obtaining, R-range systems means that the cost of getting these transport and stores systems up and running can be minimal. Even where installing the systems requires installation of purpose-bought

hardware, however, the potential cost payback is attractive for all but the smallest local authority fleets," Russell says.

Middlesex Software is convinced that it is on to a winner with the new system, because of the attractions of both hardware and software. Members of the Association of London Transport Officers who have seen the system at work say it is the most comprehensive local authority system they've come across, according to Russell.

"We are confidently expecting a number of sales over coming months," he says, "from not only London but the South Coast and the Midlands."

Meanwhile, Middlesex Software continues to develop its product line. Next to be added will be a local authority system, linked to the new transport and stores systems, which will handle all aspects of property, highway and sewer maintenance to create a complete Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) system to Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy standards.

Further enquiries on these products should be addressed to Middlesex Software Services Limited, 143 Ellerman Avenue, Twickenham, Middlesex TW2 6AD.