An untapped waste stream

Improving resource efficiency is a key sustainability commitment for councils and their commercial partners, but some highways materials are still not always being recycled. Tristan Miles, director of cleansing and traffic management at FM Conway calls for a greater focus on recycling and reusing valuable waste streams

As an industry, we are undoubtedly recycling more materials, but in some instances failure to improve the reuse of highways material is hampering our ability to realise the fiscal and economic benefits of the circular economy. This damages environmental performance and means that local authorities and network operators are still paying high landfill costs for materials that could be recycled and reused.

Gully waste is a prime example of a waste stream that is not being fully maximised. Every year high volumes of gully waste arisings are produced as a result of ongoing road maintenance. This waste typically consists of sand and gravel, leaves and other organics, aggregates and litter.

These arisings have traditionally been either sent straight to landfill or dewatered and then sent to landfill. With landfill costs now standing at £72 a tonne and the tariff set to rise to £80 a tonne in 2014, there is a fiscal incentive to take a more sustainable approach.

Why is more gully waste not being recycled? Firstly, there has been a lack of investment in processing plants that are able to undertake the separation, filtration and screening of constituent materials to produce higher value products.

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Secondly, a lack of legislative clarity has also hindered the growth of the sector.

This was resolved last year with the publication of the Environment Agency's (EA) 'Recovery of Street Sweepings and Gully Emptyings' guidance which clarifies the types of waste that qualify as non-hazardous. It also outlines material which is inert and the permissible disposal routes for both treated and untreated street sweepings and gully waste.

Critically, this guidance note clearly highlights that untreated street sweepings and gully emptyings have limited or expensive disposal routes. Worryingly, a number of councils raised concerns to the Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee (LARAC) that the guidelines could leave them exposed to additional financial burdens. This indicates that they are failing to recognise the environmental and commercial benefits of reusing these materials.

FM Conway has invested in recycling infrastructure and currently cleans more than one million road gullies every year on behalf of councils. We collect waste in our fleet of gully suction tanks and transport it to our drainage treatment plant for separation, filtration and screening to make it reusable.

This facility can process around 45,000 tonnes of waste per annum, from which we recycle approximately 98 per cent of arisings. Any recovered sand and stone is separated and screened for reuse in the production of concrete and hydrocarbons are burnt offsite to produce energy. Organics and litter are the only constituents sent to landfill and the water recovered provides all the water required for our aggregates washing plant. It's an approach which is allowing councils and highways network operators to maximise gully waste and cut disposal costs.

If contractors and local authorities want to fully contribute to the circular economy they need to improve their ability to collect and treat valuable waste streams like gully waste. With tighter environmental legislation and financial implications for sending these materials to landfill, we cannot overlook this under-utilised waste stream anymore.