

Decision Session – Executive Member for Environment and Climate Emergency

Written Submission by Councillor Warters in respect of item 5.

North Yorkshire & York, Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) consultation draft

As a self employed landscape gardener for the last 35 years and prior to that employed in commercial horticulture I have watched with growing frustration how the maintenance of public space in York has gone steadily down hill for years and the decline has accelerated in the last decade to which I feel honour bound to highlight.

Commenting on the report in the order it is set out under options analysis;

Cleansing and local environmental quality.

There may well be justification for saying improvements have taken place in the last 6/12 months in the 'city' but I can only assume in the context of the report the 'city' means the city centre as residential areas outside of the city centre core have seen the usual decline in standards.

Road sweepers are never seen in outer Wards and contrary to sensible practise debris is allowed to build up on kerb lines to such an extent that drains become blocked and conditions become perfect for weed growth.

Even protracted correspondence requesting visits by road sweepers brings no results, the Exec Member should be well aware of recent correspondence I had that had to become a formal complaint to the Chief Operating Officer with regard to Murton Village.

The addition of one extra road sweeper to the CYC fleet is not going to make any difference to this situation, instead of so much money being spent/wasted on the wider fleet EV replacement fiasco - the adverse affects still felt (and seen) with staff wasting hours a week charging EVs at public charge points - had a sensible investment been made into road sweepers then much of the problems associated with debris build up on road gullies could have been alleviated.

As for the addition of more litter bins in the city centre of course that is only sensible, perhaps the CYC area as a whole might see a return to the number of litter bins that the council used to service before the ridiculous cuts of the last Labour administration (2011-15).

Weed Control.

Continues to be a fiasco both in planning and execution.

By far THE main way of cutting down weed growth and therefore weedkiller use is to clear the debris from the road gullies which as mentioned above is not carried out as proactive maintenance any longer in York.

The detritus left in the road gullies provides the perfect conditions for weeds to grow and starting a two spray weed contract in mid summer is way, way too late to prevent rampant weed growth in Spring that contributes to the neglected and overgrown state of York - as well as making spray drift from dealing with tall weeds inevitable.

Unless weed spraying is taken in house there is not the flexibility to deal with situations that arise, for example this Spring is turning into a very dry and warm Spring - ideal for spraying the first flush of weeds whilst they are small and there would be minimal regrowth, Instead of which the contractor won't even start spraying until mid-Summer it's just crazy.

Thankfully common sense prevailed and Glyphosate is still being used and the trials carried out under the last administration were, as predicted a complete waste of time.

I do hope common sense will prevail in time and that CYC bring weed control back in house as befits such a high profile and important function.

Mechanical Street Cleansing.

Quite correct to state that current street sweeping schedules don't reflect current practise but it's even more worrying that the wilful neglect of regular street sweeping is to be formalised under current proposals.

All this does is make weed control more difficult and lead to blocked drains, it really is not a sensible way to proceed as well as being dangerous when Autumn leaves add to the debris.

Verge and Open Space Management.

I have tried on numerous occasions to highlight the much better and more effective working practises on residential verges employed by neighbouring authorities like ERYC where a team work in an area - one on a mower, one with a strimmer and one with a blower - a tidy job done professionally.

Reducing grass cuts to six in a year expecting an operative on a mower to cope when the grass verge has got out of control is just not acceptable and just creates a mess.

I'm sorry but trying to state that the abject neglect of verges alongside the A1079 from Tranby Av to Grimston Roundabout is part of some plan is just misleading.

These verges have been abandoned some years ago and simply leaving rank grass to grow is not wildflowering or benefiting pollinators.

As I've tried to highlight in the past cutting twice a year and removing all the arisings would demonstrate CYC were maintaining these verges properly and with the addition of easy, early flowering plants like Ox-eye Daisies that would spread year on year have a benefit.

What CYC is doing now is just neglect.

I note again the mention of the rural verge management policy which clearly has never been promoted to farmers or landowners, some of these verges are cut more often than the urban verges! Sustainable Planting.

This is what I have a great problem with, I'd said for years under a number of administrations that some of the bedding plant displays around York were a waste of time, effort and money as bedding plants were frequently planted, never watered and allowed to become choked in weeds.

I suggested for many areas that bedding plants were scrapped and the beds left fallow for at least one year with the weeds that emerged sprayed off to give a clean start when the beds were eventually sown/replanted.

But what has happened? Areas have been planted up into weed infested beds crammed full with expensive perennial plants that now present another problem that of expensive hand weeding - indeed beds planted up only a few weeks ago are already green over with chickweed seedlings.

It's just madness to perform like this, the central island lavender planting at Fishergate/Tower street is completely choked in grass and dandelions and has been since the first season it was planted, just a mess. How many hand weeding sessions took place at Duncombe Place/Blake St to deal with beds planted up into beds everyone knew were infested with chickweed.

Replacing one labour intensive process with another - hand weeding which would not have been necessary with sensible preparation.

Some of these beds could have been done very cheaply in a very colourful way with an annual seeding mix that would have sustained itself every year, there are plenty of good examples of such work by other local authorities.

I'll reserve judgement on the Station Rise embankments but seeing the growth of creeping thistles before the new project started hardly inspires confidence and in my opinion the bedding out of those beds was one of the few locations that made sense to keep doing.

To have seen how these areas looked from many years ago as sponsored 'carpet bedding' beds to simple bedding schemes and in recent years abandoned has been very dispiriting in a city like York.

Queens Street.

I did find the proposals for Queen Street encouraging and recall reading in the planning documentation that the soil preparation/type was going to be right so I'm more enthusiastic that scheme will turn out to be a credit to the city.

I would query why more verges/green areas in Strategic Sites in the local plan aren't treated in the same way when they pass through the planning process, most will see great land disturbance and the ability to use subsoil to create wildflower areas should be very easy.

Parks and Gardens.

I couldn't let this item go without referring to Tang Hall Park (Hull Rd. Park) that was a wonderful legacy created 100 years ago when the Tang Hall estate was under construction.

The park and especially the beck running through that was such a feature has been systematically wrecked in recent years, it is a disgrace and it is an insult to the dwindling number of residents in this area who actually know what this park was like and how it was maintained in years past.

Unfortunately Tang Hall residents have seen so much of their community go in quick succession as the area has been taken over by student housing with schools, churches, pubs, clubs, shops disappearing and the sense of community going with them - I can well understand, sympathise and support that community trying to make a stand with Tang Hall Park.

I expected CYC patronising those people but what I didn't expect was to see their concerns completely dismissed as they are in paras 86 - 91 - absolutely disgraceful.

There are still some of us about who know what Tang Hall Park was and could still be if resource was properly applied but there is no encouragement to be had in what CYC are saying in this report.

Neighbourhood Caretakers.

Those who have been councillors for long enough will know we have been here before with a similar job designation of Street Environment Officers and quite honestly I believe the allocated funding would have been better spent on frontline, hands on staff members than for staff to walk around 'identifying' areas in need when all councillors should and most residents can readily identify what needs doing!