

New Weed Control Regime in Wheldrake Ward 2022

In the Spring of 2022 Wheldrake Ward accepted the offer to become a pilot ward for cutting the number of glyphosate sprays from three to two times a year. The village of Elvington went further. Elvington parish council opted to cut glyphosate spraying altogether, to protect bees, pollinators and biodiversity at large.

As part of the pilot scheme, as ward councillor, I offered each of the parish councils up to £850 from ward funding to purchasing mechanical weed clearing equipment to help address any problems if or when they occurred.

Wheldrake Parish Council did not respond. Deighton and Naburn parish councils declined the opportunity. Elvington responded positively but over the course of the year struggled to identify what equipment they might purchase to do the job. I bought a weed brush, personally, in order to understand how mechanical solutions might work and how effective they might be.

Through the year I have monitored the level of weed growth, trialled mechanical treatment of weeds, and requested officer help to remove dead vegetation from kerbsides in order to remove the most obvious encouragement for weed growth. I have trialled strimmers and a non-professional weed brush in a number of highway locations and spoken at some length with equipment manufacturers.

I have also looked at the ways in which other European countries are moving away from glyphosates and weed killers and how they are communicating this change and enlisting the support of local residents. In particular, attention is drawn to the 'Trottoir Fleuri' (flowering pavements) initiatives in dozens of French cities, including [Blois](#) and Tours and Talence.



The IMPORTANCE of SWEEPING

On 7th March I approached officers and raised the issue of running a sweeper along the kerbs to clear away leaf litter and other organic detritus as we clearly had a major problem before the pilot had even begun. Plant detritus was sitting on many street kerbs, decomposing slowly and ready to provide a perfect medium for weeds to grow in. There were already weeds growing in this detritus in March.

As we look to reduce the use of pesticides and glyphosate across the city, there seems to be very simple and straightforward things we can do to reduce the presence of weeds along our streets. The Pesticide Action Network who gave a presentation to a meeting in March (organised by Cllr Kallum Taylor and attended by city councillors, community groups and parish councils) stressed the importance of ensuring roads were well swept before the growing season began.



Officers explained that the council has 2 x road sweepers and 2 x path sweepers that we use across the entire city. In relation to the road sweepers then they will sweep along a channel but tend to sweep where there is a kerb line to sweep against.

I was told in March that CYC was currently undertaking a review of sweeping and that this would involve seeing a number of sweepers (including demonstrations of the electric sweepers coming to the market). I hope that this process is informing the council's replacement programme over the next 24 months and believe all councillors would benefit from an update.



Other councils, including Cheltenham Borough Council have noted the importance of sweeping properly.

"Last year we made a commitment to reduce the amount of weed spraying by half," they say on their website. Key to their approach is intensive cleaning: hoeing, sweeping and power washing.



◀ 11th March 2022
leaf litter along
kerbs in Wheldrake



▲ **11th March 2022 - leaf litter and detritus on Greengales Lane, Wheldrake**

Ribble Valley Council use four additional mechanical sweepers during October to February each year to assist with the removal of fallen leaves.



Lambeth Council removes weeds along kerb channels with mechanical brooms, employing manual sweepers to weed the pavements, alongside their litter-picking duties as time allows.

▼ **End of March 2022 - Main St, Wheldrake and other kerbs have been swept**



MECHANICAL WEED CONTROL

White House Grove, Elvington (south side)

Over the period of the trial I monitored weed growth along kerbs and cut them back with a cheap mechanical weed brush. The key thing to note is that most of these weeds were growing where there was leaf litter and detritus.

Clearing the vegetation took just a couple of minutes. The photos show that by early November the weeds had not quite grown back to the state they were in July.



◀ 14th July 2022
BEFORE
weed brushing



◀ 14th July 2022
AFTER
weed brushing



◀ 3rd November 2022

14th July 2022 ►
BEFORE
weed brushing



14th July 2022 ►
AFTER
weed brushing



3rd November 2022 ►



MECHANICAL WEED CONTROL

White House Grove, Elvington (north side)

◀ 14th July 2022
BEFORE
weed brushing



◀ 14th July 2022
AFTER
weed brushing



◀ 14th November 2022





**White House Grove, Elvington
(north side)**



7th Sept 2022 before weed brushing
3rd Nov 2022



It was very clear for my efforts that cheap strimmers and weed brushes, while able to remove weeds from the kerbs, are not able to deal with weeds growing on the tactile drop kerbs.

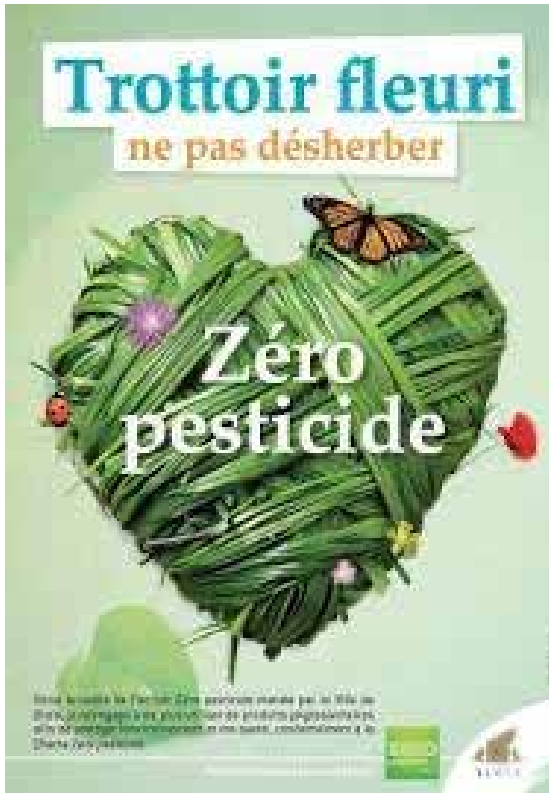
There are however a variety of weed brushes that can do this work, and many manufacturers (as-motor.uk, Kerstenuk.com and others) are happy to organise tests to check on suitability.

In a climate of continuing local government cuts, might CYC work with parish councils and community groups to assist in the purchasing of machines that could be used by those groups / organisations as part of their grass cutting and maintenance programmes, taking the burden away from the city council?



DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

It is not the case that everyone views wildflowers and plants as pests that must be eradicated at every turn. While local authorities clearly have to ensure that vegetation does not damage or destroy infrastructure, there are places where wild plant can grow with causing damage. Allow wildflowers to grow encourages biodiversity and protect pollinators.



The French Trottoir Fleuri (flowering pavements) initiative involves local residents and uses [videos](#) to focus minds on the beneficial biodiversity impact of wild flowers growing along the city's streets. For example in Blois 15 streets have been designated Trottoirs Fleuri.

Street posters explain what plants are growing and how they benefit the environment. The project is a partnership with a national conservation organisation. 307 plant species have been identified.

The city council invites residents to subscribe to the project and give them wildflowers seeds to sow along the pavement edge. Over 500 residents right across the city from the centre to the suburbs have joined the programme.

In other words city councils have a role to enhance biodiversity and to encourage a shift away from the assumption that a dead street is a pretty street.

Along with wildflower verges and the transforming the city walls into a summer meadow, a new pavement management approach would allow the city of York to become a real leader on biodiversity. Community groups, residents, our universities and conservation organisations could help make this happen.





Conclusions

Councils maintain the public realm on behalf of all their residents. Even in a world of continuous cuts to local government, we cannot be led by that minority of voices who value sterile public spaces at the expense of the natural world.

In his speech to OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) on 5th October 2022, Justin Addison - Second Secretary at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office - said that: *“2022 is a critical year for biodiversity and our planet.”* A Natural History Museum report in May 2022 revealed that *“the UK’s flying insects have declined by 60% in 20 years.”*

Those who believe that a pretty street is one utterly bereft of plants, insects, pollinators, birds and mammals, with only concrete and tarmac, may one day have their wish but it won't be a world in which humanity can survive.

The weed control pilot in Wheldrake ward has shown that there are less destructive ways of managing the growth of wild plants.



here?



or here?

In the survey I am currently conducting in Elvington over 50% of respondents want to see more wildflower planting, while 24% of respondents consider overgrown footpaths and pavements to be an issue (after a year where no pesticides have been used in the village.) The parish council has received no complaints about weeds.

In Wheldrake village 36% want to see more wildflower planting, while 21% consider overgrown footpaths a problem (after a year in which sprays have been reduced from 3 to 2.) Aside from the survey results, I have received no complaints from residents about weeds or overgrown pavements in the ward, though I am aware of a single individual in Deighton complaining to officers.

I hope that in the year ahead we plan early and conduct a thorough sweep of all the streets before the growing season and that we look to doing a second weed brush sweep in the summer to remove leaf litter and detritus and plants that might be growing in the kerbs, rather than blanket spraying glyphosates from quadbikes. I hope we allow those areas where residents wish to avoid the use of glyphosates altogether to be allowed to do so and helped to make a success of it. I also hope we look to trialling the French approach of “flowering pavements” in say a dozen streets with the support of residents to see how to manage the public realm to the enhancement of biodiversity.

Cllr Christian Vassie, Wheldrake Ward, City of York Council, November 2022