
30 January 2023

Economy and Place Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Report of the Head of Environmental Services

Portfolio of the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change

Weed Management

Summary

1. This report provides an overview on how the council manages weeds on the highway and open spaces.

Recommendations

2. The Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

Review the content of the overview and provide any recommendations to the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change

Reason

To improve the care and maintenance of the local environment including roads and streets, the city centre and parks and green space.

Background

3. Weed control primarily takes place along the adopted highway, communal housing areas and a limited range of parks and open space locations. This is done through a combination of in-house staff and an external weed control company.
 4. Public Realm staff spray around obstacles in verges e.g., lampposts, street signs, trees, around communal drying areas and some parks and garden path edges and fence bottoms. This takes
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place in March / April and at ad hoc times later in the year as the need arises. Other areas such as shrub beds are maintained through manual weeding or the application of mulch / wood chip.

5. The contracted service covers aspects of the highway network - kerbs, footpaths / pavement joints, wall bottoms and back lanes, the bar walls upper footpath, bridges and supporting structures. Weed killer (glyphosate) is delivered in the main using quad bikes, supported with knapsack spraying. This takes place 3 times a year – April/May, June/July, and September/October (subject to weather conditions).
6. The above contract also includes the treatment of several injurious weeds and invasive plants, such as Creeping and Spear Thistle, Giant Hogweed and Japanese Knotweed. Our agricultural tenants e.g., Hob Moor, may also treat thistle with weep wipes or by topping (removal if the flower head before it sets seed).
7. In addition to the weed contract itself, the Public Realm service undertakes a programme of road and footpath sweeping across the city and this contributes to reducing detritus etc in the channels of roads and footpaths.

Previous Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change decisions

8. 7th October 2019. The Executive Member received an update of the service performance in relation to highway weed control and options for improvements to that service.
 9. One of the main outcomes from this meeting was the requirement that officers should investigate alternative methods weed treatment. Due to Covid pandemic of this work was delayed until 2021 and included testing or investigating
 - Acetic Acid applied at 20% strength, also known as vinegar (for human consumption is usually 5% strength),
 - Nonanoic acid (or Pelergaonic acid), a naturally occurring fatty acid)
 - Hot foam – boiling water with added foam (see more detail below)
 - Burning – using a portable propane torch
 - Manual e.g., with wire brush / hoe
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10. 12th January 2022. At this meeting the Executive Member received a report which examined options for weed treatment to inform how the Council's in house service and external contractors manage weeds for the next two years. The report included information on alternatives to using glyphosate including the outcome of trials of treatments undertaken in York, and the approach taken by a range of local authorities.
 11. At the meeting it was agreed that
 - glyphosate based treatments would continue to be used as the principal method of weed control.
 - That a new a two-year contract for highway weed treatment be let, with an option to extend for two years, with that decision being brought back to a future decision session.
 - A report be brought back to a future decision session, detailing discussions with a range of external organisations to obtain extra information on the feasibility of additional weed control trials.
 12. The above decision was called in by the Customer and Corporate Services Scrutiny Management Committee. Following the meeting in February 2022 it was agreed (in summary) to
 - a) To commit to phasing out the use of glyphosate, focusing on non-highway areas first then developing a plan for highways.
 - b) To start work with partners, such as Defra, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and Pesticides Action Network (PAN) to further explore and evaluate the best alternative weed management approaches.
 - c) Full and openly transparent trials over the coming summer will be offered to all wards to evaluate the impact of fewer glyphosate treatments. 'Pilot' wards will have one less externally contracted weed spray and will have street furniture strimmed once by the council's frontline teams, instead of the normal single spray carried out by the council's teams.
 - d) The procurement process for the new external contract will clarify that the council is on a journey to phase out glyphosate,
 - e) The results of all the trials will be reported to the Executive Member in January 2023
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13. 14th December 2022. At this meeting the Executive Member received a report which provided feedback on those wards and location which had omitted spray 3 and swapped weed spraying for strimming around highway verge obstacles. It also reported back on the discussion officers had undertaken with various organisations such as the Environment Agency, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and PAN.
14. The following wards participated in the weed pilot of 2022:-

Ward	Area
Guildhall	Whole ward
Osbaldwick and Derwent	Whole ward
Hull Road	Whole ward
Micklegate	Whole ward
Holgate	Defined areas to be omitted from spray
Fishergate	Whole ward
Rural West	Whole ward to be omitted from apart from Skelton.

15. At the meeting it was agreed:
- To offer wards the opportunity to opt out of a third spray in 2023 (i.e., not receiving spray 3 in September/October).
 - To offer wards the opportunity to opt out of a second spray in 2023 (i.e., not receiving spray 2 in June/July)
 - To cease spraying by Public Realm teams around trees within the highway verge.

Subsequently, a letter has been sent to all ward members advising that they can put their ward forward for this arrangement in 2023. Members have been asked to respond to the Public Realm service by 24th March 2023.

A copy of the report to the December 2022 meeting and appendices is included in Annex 1. Please note that some additional feedback from Cllr Vassie has been included as he sent feedback in the form of a case study for Wheldrake ward.

Issues raised by the Chair in advance

16. How CYC manages the performance of its primary contractor and anything it is doing/considering improving this. Response:
- The primary contractor provides weekly updates on which areas of the city has been treated. Evidence of die back will not be evident for 7 to 14 days after spraying depending on the type of plant treated. After this period has passed personal observation by Public Realm management and supervisors, elected members and members of the public are used to assess the effectiveness of the treatment. Where remedial action is required, the contractor is brought back at their expense.
 - With the existing staff resource available no changes to this approach are envisaged (please note that a restructure has taken place in Environmental Services and a new structure should be in place by March 2023. This includes an Operations Manager post that has been vacant for some time).
17. Details of any exclusion zones in City Parks / playground or near water and what methods of weed control are used in these areas. Response:
- There are no formal exclusion zones for the use of glyphosate as, with the correct application, is approved for use in all locations.
 - In practice the council does not use glyphosate inside play areas but does use it under boundary fences. Where weeds are present, i.e., in bark chip, these are manually removed and on wet pour surface moss / algae is removed by pressure washing.
 - Use near water courses is permitted and is used by the Environment Agency in such circumstances (see Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change Decision Session 14th December 2022). The critical factor here is that it is only used in dry weather such that it does not run or get washed off the plant and into gullies which link to the local water course.
18. Detail on how the Pollinator Strategy is being adhered to in this service area and explanation for any ways it might not be versus other Council requirements. Response
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- On 13th December 2022 the Climate Emergency Policy and Scrutiny Committee received an update on the progress of the Pollinator Strategy Item 19. Within the report reference was made to the ongoing work overseen by Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change and the Scrutiny Committee minute states *The Committee welcomed the work undertaken in the Pollinator Strategy and were informed of how it had been incorporated into operations and projects.*
- Glyphosate is used as a spot treatment; therefore, pollinators could be harmed if they were on the plant at the time it was treated. This is considered possible but unlikely as the disturbance caused by the spray / contractor is likely to cause the pollinator to move away. The plant which was being sprayed will not mature to flower so there is the loss of future food source - this would happen with other treatment options i.e., manual removal.
- The primary focus to assist pollinators is through changes to the management regime for large grassland areas e.g. near the Millennium Bridge, Clifton Ings. Areas where no spraying takes place and reduced mowing is happening.
- All efforts are made to adhere to the Pollinator Strategy. Nevertheless, the Council also has to ensure that it manages the Highway network effectively and therefore the Council, has to ensure that efforts are made to protect roads and footpaths from weed growth/damage. Striking this balance needs is important in terms of highway asset maintenance and degradation.

19. Details on how CYC expect to achieve its stated commitment to phase out the use of pesticides from this service and the date by which this is done. Response:

- No exact date has been set. In the meantime,
 - a) the impact of reduced spraying is being assessed along with the continued exploration of alternative treatment options.
 - b) For 2023, the Council will stop using glyphosate to treat weed / grass growth around established trees.
 - c) The Council continues to keep abreast of developments in this area and explores options to share best practice with other local authorities and partners.
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20. Given CYC's commitment to phase out the use of pesticides from this service and how we also know that communities have different views of levels of control, a comparison of the non-toxic methods of weed control we should be considering using after the current contract expires, and how they would be best applied in York. This should include both methods and costs to remove grown weeds and preventative (like removing leaves and detritus from roads before they do grow). Response:

- Once this year's (2023) trials have finished, it is envisaged that a report will be brought back to the Executive Member for a decision on what type of contract will be let for 2024 onwards.
- The council has two large road sweepers and two path sweepers that undertake sweeping across the highway/path network across the city (there are also two small articulated mini sweepers that operate in the city centre). There is no scope within the current budgets to increase this number.
- If additional staff resources were to be committed to this area for manual sweeping, then a Grade 5 employee with on costs is approximately £28,000 per annum
- Additional street sweeping vehicles depending on size costs as follows; in the region of £180,000 for a large road sweeper, in the region of £120,000 for a path sweeper. A mini articulated sweeper costs in the region of £90,000. The costs of a driver (Grade 5 employee) would be approximately £28,000 per annum.

21. More detail on the "Work with Other Agencies" that the Report from the Executive Member Decision Session on 14/12/22 touches on; including liaison with local authorities who have been successful in this area (because they exist). Response:

- At the Executive Member Decision Session on 12th January 2022 Annex 2 listed some 21 local authorities who had responded to APSE and of the 21 LA's only 1 (London borough of Hounslow) had ceased to use glyphosate.
 - The council is aware of some authorities that have ceased using glyphosate. One of these authorities is Glastonbury Town Council. Glastonbury have confirmed that they use a hot foam method exclusively and that it is a two person operation. Glastonbury Town Council covers just to town area and the local District Council are responsible for the
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parcs and play equipment and they continue to use glyphosate.

- Isle of Wight Council took the decision to stop using glyphosate and after a two year period reversed this decision due to weed growth across the highway network.
- Information from Manchester City Council was included in the report of December 2022. Manchester have also confirmed that an article in a press article regarding their glyphosate usage was erroneous.
- PAN have included case studies from local authorities in their information and this is included in the Annexes.

22. Detail on how risk is managed in this service area both in terms of day-to-day operations and previous decisions to continue with using glyphosate as the main primary method. Response:

- The current external contractor is nationally accredited and has 20 years' experience in the sector working for several local authorities. As part of their tenders' submission, they are required to provide proof of accreditation, suitable insurance cover, evidence of staff qualifications, risk assessments and method statements.
- The contractor is able to provide GPS data to identify speeds at which vehicles have travelled whilst undertaking spraying activity.
- In house staff are trained and accredited to carry out spraying. This includes PA1 and PA6 spraying certificates. Staff receive training and refresher training through accredited training providers. Further staff training is planned for 2023 to train any new members of staff (e.g. city centre, general operatives etc).

23. Any ideas / further work that Officers would be interested in exploring in this area. Response:

- Information included above make reference to the work already going on in relation to the future management and treatment of weeds.

Summary

24. Glyphosate remains the treatment of choice for most, if not all, local authorities with a highway function. We are not aware of, but

suspect the horticultural / chemical industry's will be looking at alternatives; as yet these are not commercially viable.

25. Manual weed treatment for some of the highway network is an option but this would require a significant increase in the council's workforce to delivery. For health and safety reasons, a total move to manual control would require road closures and / or traffic management in place further adding to the cost and disruption. If the Council was minded to further increase street sweeping vehicles to support this and then the additional costs plus the associated cost of disposal of the arisings and debris would need to be considered.
26. The further trials of reduced spraying will test the public's appetite for more weeds on the highway and allow the Council to fully appraise the impact non spraying may have on an incremental basis.
27. The impact of more weeds could lead to a degradation of the highway/path network and therefore associated re-instatement costs and/or insurance claims. This needs to be borne in mind in making any decisions.

Council Plan

28. This report supports and contributes to the following Council Plan priority – a greener and cleaner city

Implications

- **Financial** – This operation (outlined within the report) is funded from the net revenue expenditure budget for public realm, for 2022/23 this is £3.3m.
 - **Other** – none
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Contact Details

Authors:

Ben Grabham
Head of Environmental
Services
Tel No: 07749 710152

Dave Meigh
Strategy and Contracts
Manager
Tel No: 07923 217442

Chief Officer Responsible for the report:

James Gilchrist
Director of Environment, Transport and
Planning

Report **Date** 20/01/2023
Approved

Wards Affected:

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background papers

Decision Session Executive Member for Environment and Climate
Change 7th October 2019

Decision Session Executive Member for Environment and Climate
Change 12th January 2022 Weed Management of Highways and
Associated Areas

Customer and Corporate Services Scrutiny Management Committee
(Calling In) 7th February 2022 – Weed Treatment Options.

Climate Emergency Policy and Scrutiny Committee 13th December
2022 Pollinator Strategy Update

Decision Session Executive Member for Environment and Climate
Change 14th December 2022

Annexes

Annex 1 - Weed Management of Highways and Associated Areas – Pilot wards feedback and next steps Report to Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change, 14 December 2022

Annex 2 - Member Feedback

Annex 3 - December report photos

Annex 4 - December report Nov photos

Annex 5 - PAN Guide for LA

Annex 5a - PAN Three year pesticide phase out plan

Annex 6 - Wheldrake Ward report Nov 22
