

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**28 NOVEMBER 2019**

REPORT TITLE	Progress report on future alternatives to Glyphosate for Weed Control
REPORT OF	Colin Clayton, Assistant Director, Community Services

REPORT SUMMARY

This report presents the current position regarding Wirral Council's use of glyphosate and proposed measures to reduce its usage, whilst developing and monitoring the Council's weed control strategy - balancing the operational challenges with our commitment to protecting our environment and the Glyphosate Free Wirral motion as passed by Council.

The report will propose longer term measures that if agreed, would eliminate the use of glyphosate in some areas of high public footfall and recreational activity, whilst maintaining local environmental quality on streets and highways, recognising that in the short term, the continued use of glyphosate may be essential. Officers are also mindful that a long-term plan (post 2022) will also need consideration in the event that licensing of glyphosate-based products is withdrawn. This report does not consider the management of Hoylake Beach which is being managed as a separate issue.

RECOMMENDATION/S

1. That Members note the intention to utilise the next 12 months to examine all potential weed control solutions as alternatives to glyphosate.
2. That Members note this research will form the basis of a further report to this committee in November 2020 identifying the outcomes.
3. That Members further note that a 12 month trial ceasing glyphosate use in some settings will commence with immediate effect.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on the recent work around glyphosate following the Glyphosate Free Wirral motion as passed by Council.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 This report will discuss alternative weed control methods to glyphosate, however it is not possible at this early stage to present options that would constitute a full replacement.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Like the majority of Local Authorities in the UK, Wirral Council employs a system of weed control, either through its own operations or via commissioned services, that uses glyphosate as the principal chemical means by which to control the presence of weeds on land within its ownership.
- 3.2 Glyphosate based herbicides have been used for over 40 years and are generally considered cheap, effective and readily available herbicides essential to grounds maintenance functions. They are a systemic herbicide meaning that there has to be a weed present in some stage of growth for the active ingredients to contact prior to being absorbed and killing the weed. Until the early 2000s many Local Authorities used residual based herbicides as a preventative method, which could be sprayed without weed growth being present and stopped weeds growing due to their capacity to remain in soil and detritus. Concerns around the environmental impact of residual herbicides led them to be banned.
- 3.3 The use of glyphosate based products is legal in the UK, being licenced until December 2022. Nonetheless, a report from the International Agency for Research on Cancer in 2015, found that glyphosate was “a probable human carcinogen”, sparking a worldwide debate as to the validity of its continued usage. Recent court rulings in the USA have found in favour of claimants who cite glyphosate use as having caused them to develop cancer. There are also over 18,400 more lawsuits progressing through the US Courts. The scientific data is however conflicting, with

the European Food Safety Authority and the European Chemicals Agency's Committee for Risk Assessment have found no safety concerns that would prevent continuing approval.

- 3.4 At this time there is no overall international consensus on the risks and glyphosate remains a legal product in the UK to use. With regard to category of risk Glyphosate falls within the same World Health Organisation carcinogenic category as meat and shift work, whilst bacon and sausage fall into a higher level of 'carcinogenic' risk category.
- 3.5 Weed control in public areas such as street pavements and footpaths is a crucial service undertaken by the Council on behalf of communities. A good quality, consistent weed control programme reduces slip and trip hazards and potential access issues, reduces the damage caused by root growth to urban surfaces and improves aesthetic appeal.
- 3.6 The Council currently delivers highway weed control through an outsourced contract with Mancoed VM Services covering all streets and adopted highways. This contract is operational until May 2021 and recommissioning options are currently being considered. Parks and Countryside services also utilise glyphosate in management of Council land.
- 3.7 Risks associated with the use of glyphosate in highways are managed by Mancoed through their submitted method statements and risk assessments. In amenity areas, such as parks, legally enforceable conditions of use are imposed on the way products can be applied to ensure the public are not exposed to levels of herbicides that would harm health or have unacceptable effects on the environment. Parks and Countryside service's use of the product is targeted and then only by authorised and qualified operatives who have the skills and knowledge to use it within the conditions specified.
- 3.8 UK law requires operators hold at least NPTC PA1 and PA6 certifications to use glyphosate professionally. Training covers the safe use, storage and handling of pesticides with emphasis on techniques that minimise use and off-target drift. All Man Coed and Wirral Council employees who use the product are suitably qualified. The specific PPE requirements are always detailed in the product label.
- 3.9 In July 2019 Wirral Council passed a Glyphosate Free Wirral motion which stated

“Council requests Cabinet or recommends that cabinet resolves to:

Request that officers establish how the Wirral can move from a borough where there is clearly a problem with the prevalence of long established and persistent weeds on footways, roadsides and traffic islands to a borough where the alternative controls and courses of action suggested can be introduced as set out.

Grant an exception to the above ban regarding the control of Japanese knotweed, Hogweed or other invasive species. In such cases, all means possible will be used to minimise the spread of the chemicals into the surrounding area.

Write to the prime minister to inform the government of this Council’s opposition to glyphosate-based herbicides and to call for a UK-wide programme to phase out their use.”

3.10 This report to Environment OSC forms part of Officers response to this motion.

Current Position and Alternative Solutions

3.11 The use of glyphosate by Wirral Council remains by far the most efficient and cost-effective method for the wholesale treatment of common weeds. Some alternative methods do enable specific niche use, but none will deliver the value and efficiency of total systemic herbicide (e.g. glyphosate), particularly when addressing the scale of treatment required for streets / pavements/ roadside channels.

3.12 Whilst the Council considers its position regarding the future strategic policy around the universal treatment of weeds in the Borough, the wholesale withdrawal of glyphosate at this time would prove both costly and operationally challenging due to:

Cost – There is no current market solution that delivers the existing treatment requirements within existing budgets.

Service Delivery – Current commissioned services specifications mandate the use of chemical treatment as the primary solution for the control of weeds and unwanted vegetation.

Operational Solutions – Whilst other treatment methods are available on the market, none are likely to deliver a solution on the scale and frequency required.

Unique Challenges – Glyphosate is widely considered as the only permissible solution that is available to combat the infestation of invasive weeds such as

Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed. A complete ban on glyphosate at this time would leave no other solution.

- 3.13 The Council does however recognise that work needs to start with immediate effect to identify a package of solutions that will eventually lead to the complete phasing out of Glyphosate. This could both present opportunities and mitigate risks as follows:

Environmental Protection –We want Wirral to be a clean, safe and attractive place to live and work therefore should strive to eliminate the use of any potential environmental or health damaging products.

Future Certainty – In 2022, there remains a risk that the licence for glyphosate based products could be withdrawn. Acting now to identify and implement non-chemical solutions will put the Council at an advantage should the licence for glyphosate not be renewed.

Creating Opportunities - Advancing research into alternatives now into future solutions could lead to innovative future delivery models and greater use of mechanical, thermal and community-based solutions to municipal weed control.

Next Steps and Alternatives

- 3.14 Work to identify solutions to glyphosate based herbicides has commenced with Officers contacting other regional local authorities and market-based solution providers. Currently Liverpool, Sefton and Cheshire West and Chester have confirmed that they are broadly adopting the same approach as Wirral in that they will look to reduce their use of glyphosate whilst trialling alternative solutions. Wirral officers have also arranged several demonstrations of thermal and mechanical weed control solutions.
- 3.15 Officers recently arranged a combined demonstration of non-chemical weed control using a combination of thermal treatment via a propane fired burner and mechanical scrubbing away of weeds using rotating steel wire discs attached to power units. Whilst these methods technically work further understanding would be needed of operational cost and performance on a larger scale. Preliminary indications by the Contract Manager is that this would not be a practical system to use on highways across the borough.

- 3.16 Officers have also seen a demonstration of hot foam technology, which kills weeds via heat. The foam product uses palm oil as an ingredient which would likely affect the sustainability of this product's use.
- 3.17 From December 2019 the Council will pilot a 12 month trial of no glyphosate use in parks, play areas and cemeteries. With the exception of the treatment of invasive weeds such as Japanese Knotweed, Marestalk, Giant Hogweed and tree stumps. During this 12 month trial period the effects of reduced weed control will be monitored. Weed control will be principally driven by customer demand, highlighting to officers the type of infrastructure where weed growth causes most concern and the level of weed growth which the public will tolerate if glyphosate is not to be used and also other impacts (e.g. infrastructure damage from increased weed growth). Where weed control is undertaken, except for invasive weeds and tree stumps, physical methods will be used to control weeds, for example strimming and hoeing.
- 3.18 Discussions are also underway with Biffa, who hold the Council's street cleansing contract to explore possibilities for removal of weeds in some areas using manual methods negating use of secondary removal methods.
- 3.19 Officers will continue to investigate alternative methods of weed control for Wirral's highways and footways. Examples of alternative methods which have been seen by Officers are not capable of weed control on the scale required for the Borough's highways. The current highways weed control contract is delivered by sprayers mounted upon quad bikes which can cover large stretches of highway rapidly.
- 3.20 Therefore alternative solutions for weed control on highways would likely involve spraying from quad bikes, to achieve weed control at the scale required. Glasgow City Council officers have examined alternative weed control sprays and officers are liaising with them over success of trials and costings.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The current Mancoed contract for the control of weeds on highways using glyphosate costs the Council approximately £250,000 per annum. In the 2018 spraying season (April-September) the Parks and Countryside service spent £7398 on glyphosate whilst only spending £1313.90 on glyphosate in the 2019 spraying season. This demonstrates the Council's ongoing commitments to reduce glyphosate spraying and use.

- 4.2 The costs associated with the cessation of glyphosate as the primary method of the control of weeds and unwanted vegetation across all the Council's estates and assets are currently unknown, this would be subject to the identified optimum of mix of alternative treatment technologies. This would involve an analysis of initial costs, ongoing service and maintenance costs and necessity for any new training of staff. If a new method of weed control was more time consuming this would also increase cost whether delivered in house or contracted out due to increased staff time.
- 4.3 Notwithstanding, it is anticipated that deploying any other means of controlling weeds and unwanted vegetation, other than glyphosate, will lead to a significant increase in associated cost.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Section 89(2) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 places a duty on Local Authorities in respect of publicly maintainable highways in their area, to ensure that the highway or road is, so far as is practicable, kept clean – meaning the removal of detritus as well as litter and refuse. The removal of detritus is deemed to be practicable from metalled surfaces only. Weed growth from seeds germinating in moist detritus would therefore be considered as requiring removal by the Council under the Act.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS

- 6.1 It is anticipated that deploying any other means of controlling weeds and unwanted vegetation, other than glyphosate, will lead to a significant increase in both mechanical and physical / staffing resource requirements.
- 6.2 A good quality, consistent weed control programme has the potential to reduce the damage caused by root growth to highway assets, urban surfaces and reduce long term maintenance costs.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 Stopping the immediate use of Glyphosate in a 12 month trial, in the areas identified above will likely lead to an increase in visible weeds in the short term. This in turn could compromise the structural integrity of some hard surfaces and be unsatisfactory to residents.

7.2 It is possible that despite extensive solutions being sought, there may in fact be no suitable solution that is capable of replacing glyphosate for broad coverage areas – streets, footways, passageways etc.

7.3 In the event that an alternative solution or package of solutions for weed control is identified it is likely to cost more than current weed control methods. This is especially true for methods that require new equipment either as capital spend if purchased or revenue spend if leased.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

8.1 Consultation and research will be undertaken with the amenity services market, appropriate service providers / suppliers and neighbouring / national local authorities.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None because there is no relevance to equality.

9.2 Future actions arising from this work may require an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) an EIA will be undertaken at a future date if required

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The environmental and climate implications of any alternatives to glyphosate will be considered as part of their evaluation. This has already been noted in demonstrations which have already been seen. For example, Officers noted the use of palm oil in the detergent additive of hot foam weed control technology. Palm oil is a controversial ingredient due to concerns around the clearing of rainforests to create palm oil plantations. Similarly thermal weed control often relies upon burning propane, a finite resource which also releases CO₂ when combusted. This demonstrates that it will be important to fully consider the environmental and climate impacts of any alternative to glyphosate.

REPORT AUTHOR: Colin Clayton

Assistant Director Community Services

Telephone: (0151) 691 8361

E-mail: colinclayton@wirral.gov.uk

APPENDICES

N/A

BACKGROUND PAPERS

N/A

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Full Council	15th July 2019