

**Report to:** Lead Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment

**Date of meeting:** 19 December 2022

**By:** Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

**Title:** East Sussex County Council's Alternative Weed Maintenance Techniques Trials 2022

**Purpose:** To report on the outcomes of highway weed control trials and recommendations for future weed control

---

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** The Lead Member is recommended:

- (1) To note the feedback, outcomes and challenges from the trials; and**
  - (2) To agree to extend the volunteer streets weed control trial and reactive weed removal trial to include additional roads to further understand the impact of not using Glyphosate on the highway infrastructure.**
- 

## **1 Background Information**

1.1. On 20 September 2021, Councillor Maples and Councillor Hilton presented a Notice of Motion to the Chairman to eliminate the use of Glyphosate herbicide formulation in East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) weed control.

1.2. At the meeting on 22 November 2021, the Lead Member for Transport and Environment recommended rejecting the motion as it is not possible to completely eliminate use of pesticides but three trials for alternative weed maintenance techniques in 2022 were planned with the aim of working towards introducing new methods as part of the next highway maintenance contract in 2023. The three trials agreed were a Volunteer Streets weed control trial, a reactive weed removal trial, and a foam stream weed control trial.

## **2 Supporting Information**

2.1. In line with the County Council Highway Verges and Vegetation Policy, a single treatment of a Glyphosate based herbicide from the Health and Safety Executive's Pesticides Register of UK Authorised Products suitable for use on highways is used.

2.2. The total cost of weed control for a single treatment is approximately £55,000 per year and this is provided by the Council's highway maintenance contractor.

### Current Weed Maintenance Application and Usage

2.3. Weed growth in channels (the part of the road in front of the kerb) can slow down or clog up and prevent the highway drainage system from working properly. Weeds also damage paved surfaces, displace kerbstones and crack walls making maintenance difficult and costly. Weeds can also have safety implications for pedestrians by causing trip hazards, as well as generally looking untidy.

2.4. ESCC carry out one weed spray per year on 1,914 miles of channels, footpaths, central reservations and islands to manage and control vegetation growth on the highway network, using a herbicide that contains Glyphosate. Spraying is carefully controlled and only applied where weeds are found, and not undertaken on windy or rainy days.

2.5. The herbicide is applied to weeds in a concentration of 95% water to 5% herbicide, with a small amount of vegetable oil added for adhesion and spray control.

2.6. The sprayed herbicide mixture enters the plant through its leaves and breaks down the weed's cell structure to kill the weed over a few days following application. The application by spray ensures that all parts of the plant are broken down, including the roots, and therefore slows down any regrowth.

### Alternative Weed Maintenance Techniques Trialled

2.7. Three alternative methods of weed control were trialled:

2.8. The Volunteer Streets Opt-out and Reactive trials were undertaken in appropriately selected locations in Lewes and Hastings, as agreed with Councillors Maples and Hilton.

2.9. Trials of a reactive only approach were trialled where weed control was only undertaken when safety issues were identified through routine inspections or customer reports.

2.10. A Foam Steam demonstration / trial was undertaken at the Idverde Depot in Newhaven and in Mayfield Avenue, Peacehaven.

2.11. The Equality Impact Assessment for these trials can be found at appendix 5.

#### Volunteer Streets Opt-Out Trial

2.12. See Appendix 1 for full details of the trial.

2.13. The opt-out approach gave residents in particular streets the option to 'opt-out' of the Council's weed spraying programme and to undertake manual weed control themselves. To be eligible, agreement of a minimum of 60% of the residents of the street was required and the resident volunteers would agree to undertake weed removal. An agreement and guidance were drawn up in consultation with ESCC Insurance team so that volunteers could be insured by the Council. Following a short safety training session and local risk assessment the volunteers were issued with personal protective equipment and notification documents to be completed when undertaking clearance works.

2.14. No safety issues were raised during the trial.

2.15. Whilst the local residents considered the trial largely successful the results were variable with some roots left behind which quickly re-grew and weeds in the channels not removed because of restrictions working in the road.

2.16. It should also be noted that this approach relies on the time and enthusiasm of volunteers which could wane over time and requires Officer time to administer and monitor.

#### Reactive Trial

2.17. See Appendix 2 for full details of the trial.

2.18. The reactive maintenance trial worked on the same principle as other highway reactive services, such as pothole repairs, whereby contractors attended when safety defects were identified by the Highway Stewards either through routine safety inspections or as a result of public reports. As such, not all the streets in the trial received a weed treatment if no weed growth was identified or notified. Where weeds were identified they were removed either by hand-pulling or strimming, depending on the location and type of weeds present.

2.19. No safety issues were identified with this approach during the trial but given the ad hoc nature of this approach it was felt that moving to a reactive approach would most likely lead to an earlier deterioration in asset condition if regular maintenance was not undertaken. It would take several years of this approach to understand the wider impact.

#### Foam Stream Demonstration / Trial

2.20. See Appendix 3 for full details of the trial.

2.21. This was undertaken in conjunction with Lewes District Council's ground maintenance contractors and the equipment manufacturers. While the process itself is effective in killing weeds it is slow and resource intensive, potentially requiring 30 machines and crews to effectively treat a road network the size of East Sussex.

2.22. The cost of this approach is also considerably higher than the current budget for weed control and it would be a significant challenge to scale up and deliver the service by the method.

#### Summary of Trial Findings

2.23. The summer of 2022 was not a typical summer as it was abnormally dry (one of the driest on record), and therefore the full effects and outcomes of the Volunteer Streets and reactive trials cannot be considered conclusive, and the impact of not using glyphosate to control weeds will take a number of years to fully understand.

#### Volunteer Approach

2.24. The benefits noted included bringing communities together, no Glyphosate use, and volunteers planning their own weed maintenance with pride in their community.

2.25. Several issues were encountered particularly with the insurance requirements which required a large amount of documentation and administration by ESCC Officers; restrictions on where volunteers can weed leading to missed areas; and variation of quality of works between groups.

#### Reactive Approach

2.26. The benefits noted include not using Glyphosate and therefore providing local areas of biodiversity.

2.27. Several issues were noted including a potential cost increase associated with call outs, deterioration of assets over time, and negative public perception.

#### Foam Stream Demonstration

2.28. The benefits noted include not using Glyphosate.

2.29. Several issues were encountered including the availability of suitable equipment to scale up to treat the whole network and increased resources and costs to effectively control weeds across the whole county. It is therefore proposed to not explore the use of foam stream further at this time, and until adequate technology is more readily available.

#### Additional Research

2.30. Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC) and Leicestershire County Council, both of whom stopped using Glyphosate completely to maintain weeds, have encountered significant problems with this sudden change. These have been widely reported in local press giving rise to significant public complaint. Leicestershire County Council have since reintroduced the use of Glyphosate. See Appendix 4 for further information.

2.31. Pesticide Action Network UK state that Glyphosate needs to be phased out over three years, including trials run over several seasons. See Appendix 4 for further information.

### **3. Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations**

3.1. The Council noted the concerns of Councillors and residents relating to the use of Glyphosate and are committed to finding an alternative means of controlling weed growth, however the Authority must also meet its statutory duty to maintain a safe and usable highway network. At the present time, there is no proven alternative solution that can be effectively used to weed treat a network of over 1,900 miles of road channels and footways.

3.2. Therefore, it is recommended that the volunteer streets and reactive streets trials be extended, increasing the number of streets involved, to gather more data, monitor the impact and implement lessons learnt to improve the process. This will allow the service to see the full impacts of alternative weed treatment over a number of years and determine how various weed control techniques can best be applied across the network whilst continuing to look for new technologies and methods as they emerge. The Council will continue to use a Glyphosate based herbicide to control weeds across the highway network, alongside the proposed extension of the trial of volunteer streets and reactive streets.

3.3. Due to the cost and practical issues in using foam stream on a large highway network it is recommended that that trial is not extended any further at this stage.

#### **RUPERT CLUBB**

Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Contact Officer: Dale Poore

Tel. No. 01273 481916

Email: dale.poore@eastsussex.gov.uk

#### LOCAL MEMBERS

All

#### BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Highway Verges and Vegetation Policy