

Report to: Lead Member for Transport and Environment

Date of meeting: 11 December 2023

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Alternative Weed Maintenance Trials 2023

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

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Lead Member is recommended to:

- (1) conclude the alternative weed maintenance trials, noting the feedback, outcomes and challenges; and**
 - (2) agree to continue the use of Glyphosate as weed maintenance on the public highway until a suitable alternative or additional funding becomes available; and**
 - (3) agree to provide the option for residents to opt into a volunteer maintenance scheme or District, Borough, Parish or Town Councils to take on weed maintenance through a local agreement.**
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1 Background Information

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

1.2 At a decision-making meeting on 22 November 2021, the Lead Member for Transport and Environment resolved to recommend that Full Council reject the motion as it is not possible to completely eliminate the use of pesticides but noted that three trials for alternative weed maintenance techniques in 2022 were planned. The three trials agreed were a Volunteer Streets weed control trial; a reactive weed removal trial; and a foam stream weed control trial.

1.3 At a decision-making meeting on [19 December 2022](#), the Lead Member for Transport and Environment agreed to extend the Volunteer Streets and reactive trials for 2023.

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 Trial Continued for 2023

2.7 Three alternative methods of weed control were trialled; volunteer; reactive; and collaborative road sweeping and strimming in a select location with Wealden District Council.

2.8 The Volunteer Streets and reactive trials were open to all residents of East Sussex to apply for their streets to be included, with the support of their local Member. Applications were then reviewed to ensure they were safe locations to be part of the trial. Only residents from Lewes, Hastings and St Leonards applied and took part.

2.9 The Equality Impact Assessment for these trials can be found at Appendix 1.

Volunteer Streets Trial

2.10 Full details of the trial can be found at Appendix 2.

2.11 The volunteer trial gave residents of a particular street the option to 'opt-out' of the Council's weed spraying programme and to undertake manual weed control themselves. To be eligible, agreement from a minimum of 60% of the residents of the street was required and the resident volunteers would commit 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 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.

2.12 There is an amount of documentation and administration required for volunteers to be covered by ESCC insurance, and despite this being as streamlined as possible the feedback from volunteers was still that this was too onerous, and in some instances, there were issues of documentation not being completed.

2.13 Whilst residents considered the trial largely successful the results varied between roads, with some roads completely clear and others where large amounts of weeds remained.

2.14 Restrictions of volunteers unable to work in the road meant some channels remained full of weeds.

2.15 It should also be noted that this approach relies on the time and enthusiasm of volunteers and requires ESCC Officer time to administer and monitor progress.

Reactive Trial

2.16 Full details of the trial can be found at Appendix 3.

2.17 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. Where weeds were identified they were removed either by hand-pulling or strimming, depending on the location and type of weeds present.

2.18 The full impact would take several years to understand, however from the 2-year trial it can be seen in this limited time how weeds can affect highway infrastructure without weed maintenance. This was especially highlighted in paved areas.

2.19 Two roads which were part of the reactive trial for 2022 and were not sprayed this year, did receive several complaints of overgrown weeds and safety issues which had to be rectified.

2.20 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 highway condition if regular maintenance was not undertaken and posed significant safety concerns.

Road Strimming and Sweeping Trial

2.21 Full details of the trial can be found at Appendix 4.

2.22 The Road Strimming and Sweeping trial was undertaken in conjunction with Wealden District Council's street sweeping team.

2.23 This method was found effective when sites were accessible. However, for half the sites attempted, maintenance could not be carried out due to parked cars, therefore the method would

be difficult to apply across large parts of the county and would not be effective and efficient for the additional cost incurred.

2.24 The method also only removes the visible part of the weed plant and does not remove the roots, encouraging rapid regrowth.

3 Summary of Trial Findings

3.1 The benefits and issues found from each trial are noted below.

Volunteer Approach

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

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

Reactive Approach

3.4 The benefits noted include not using Glyphosate.

3.5 Several concerns were noted including a potential cost increase associated with call-outs to address safety defects, deterioration of assets over time, and negative public perception.

Road Sweeping and Strimming

3.6 The benefits noted include not using Glyphosate and leaving a cleaner finish, although the approach would need to be repeated several times in line with weed regrowth.

3.7 Several issues were encountered including accessing areas with parked cars, risks of using strimmer's in densely parked areas, additional labour costs, coordination of operational staff and availability and coordination of resources from different authorities.

Additional Research

3.8 Research has been collated from many Councils who have trialled different approaches, including Acetic Acid, Foam Stream, Volunteers and Weed Rippers. See Appendix 5 for full research details.

3.9 Research has found that County Councils in England are all in a similar position to ESCC and are continuing to use Glyphosate to maintain weeds having failed to find a suitable alternative.

3.10 Of the sample of 15 County Councils who advise what weed maintenance they undertake on their website, 8 undertake more weed sprays than ESCC, and 7 carry out at least 1 weed spray.

4 Proposed Options Going Forward

4.1 The following options have been proposed.

- 1) To continue to use a Glyphosate based herbicide to efficiently control weeds and continue to research and explore alternative options as they enter the market.
- 2) To offer all District, Borough, Parish and Town Councils the option to take on weed maintenance in their area, similarly to Eastbourne Borough Council, via a local agreement which allows them to explore and deploy alternatives on a local scale network.
- 3) To offer the volunteer option for residents who have a dedicated lead to coordinate weed maintenance, with the option of working under ESCC insurance cover or complying with the standard highways volunteering process, which requires their own insurance cover but allows more flexibility. See Appendix 6 for details and requirements of each insurance option.

5 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

5.1 The Council notes the concerns of Councillors and residents relating to the continued 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 useable highway network. At the present time, there is no alternative solution that can be effectively used to treat weeds over a highway network of over 1,900 miles of road channels and footways.

5.2 Therefore, it is recommended that the trials are concluded at this stage and that the Council continues to use a Glyphosate based herbicide to control weeds across the highway network, until a suitable alternative or additional funding becomes available.

5.3 The Council will also continue to offer the option of volunteer weed maintenance to appropriately resourced groups of residents and will offer District, Borough, Parish and Town Councils the option to take on weed maintenance through a local agreement.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Highway Verges and Vegetation Policy